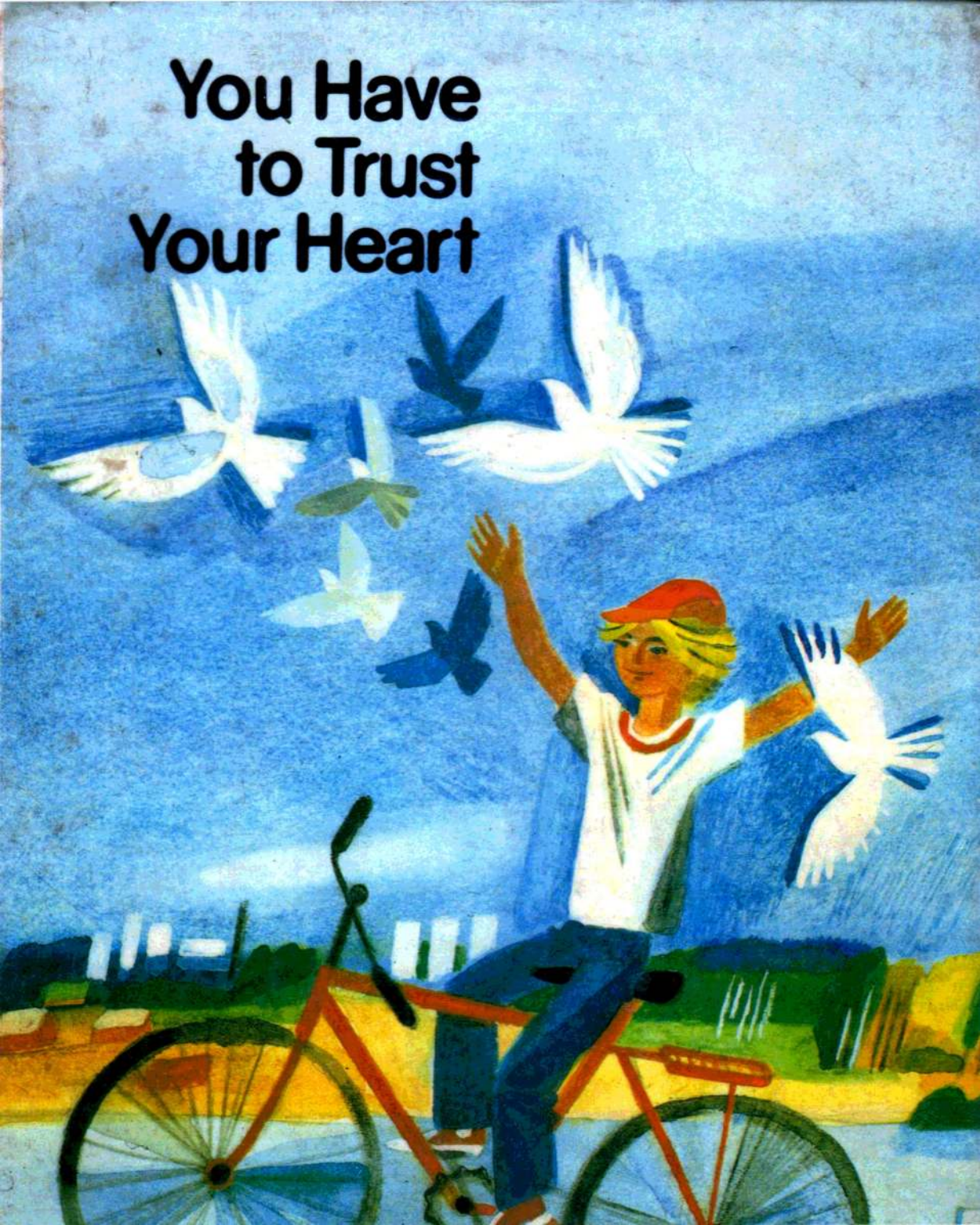
You Have to Trust Your Heart



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You Have to Trust Your Heart

Stories from Soviet Land

Illustrated by
Galina Makaveyeva
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Akram Ailisli
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Nodar Dumbadze
Don't Waken Those Feelings

Aino Pervik
The Balloon

Imants Ziedonis
Excerpts from
Epiphanies

Raduga Publishers
Moscow

Designed by *Vasili Kopeiko*
Illustrated by *Galina Makaveyeva*

Сердце — это такая штука...

Рассказы писателей народов СССР

На английском языке

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Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

$C\ \frac{4801000000-454}{031(01)-86}\ 043-86$

ISBN 5-05-000677-5

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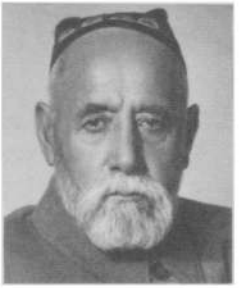
SADRIDDIN AINI

(1878-1954)



Sadriddin Aini, the founder of Soviet Tajik literature, was born into the family of a peasant in the village of Saktare in Gijduvan Region of the Bukhara Emirate (presently part of the Uzbek SSR). His father, a great lover of poetry, managed to implant in the future writer an appreciation of literature and a thirst for knowledge. During the cholera epidemic of 1890, Aini's father and mother died at almost the same time. After being orphaned, he left his native village to study Islam at Bukhara's Miri-Arab Madrasah. While studying at the madrasah, Aini supported himself by doing laundry, working as a servant in the houses of the rich, and cleaning the cells of well-to-do students. After reading the works of 19th-century Tajik enlightener Amad Donish in 1900, Aini developed a critical attitude toward the feudal regime which existed in Bukhara and realized his sympathies lay clearly on the side of the poor. He organized the first school in Bukhara for Tajik children where modern methods of instruction were employed. After the school was closed down by the emir's officials, he continued to teach at an illegal school and started a secret society which supported modern secular education. Aini wrote several textbooks and appeared in the periodical press during the First World War as the author of articles and poems. Persecution by officials of the emir's government forced Aini to go into hiding outside of Bukhara in 1915-1916, so he worked as a weigher at a cotton mill. In April 1917, when the reactionary regime grew particularly harsh, Aini was sentenced to seventy-five blows with a stick and thrown into prison. He was freed along with the other political prisoners of the emir by revolutionary Russian soldiers and moved to Samarkand. In revenge, the emir had Aini's younger brother executed in 1918.

Aini greeted the October Socialist Revolution enthusiastically and helped set up the first Soviet schools. He wrote pamphlets and proclamations. Two of Aini's songs, "March of Freedom" (1918)—to the music of the "Marseillaise"—and "Praise to October", became favourites with the young people of Tajikistan and marked the birth of Soviet Tajik literature. His elegy, "On My Brother's Death", rang out as a call for the overthrow of the emir.

From 1919 to 1921, Aini worked on the first Soviet Tajik

magazine, *Flame of the Revolution.* His articles formed the basis for the new Tajik journalism. From the mid 1920s, prose became his chief genre. In 1927-1929, he wrote the first Tajik novel devoted to the revolution, *Dokhunda.* His epic novel *Slaves* was truly a monumental work. The brilliant novella, *The Death of the Money-Lender* presents an in-depth portrait of a miser whose demise, resulting from the confiscation of his savings after the October Revolution, symbolizes the death of feudalism in Central Asia.

During World War II, Aini's articles and historical essays were devoted to the struggle of the Soviet people against fascism. From 1948 until the end of his life, Aini worked on his autobiography, *Reminiscences.* The first two parts, *In the Village* and *In the City,* were written in 1948-1949 and were published as separate editions in Tajik and Russian. *Reminiscences* is Aini's finest work; it presents a fascinating picture of the epoch preceding the first Russian revolution of 1905-1907. *In the Village* describes life in the Bukhara Emirate in the 1880s. The simple peasants one meets therein—the writer's father, his uncle Hadji Usto, Khabiba, and many others—demonstrate that the common people survive all ills and prevail in the end; their talent manifests itself despite all obstacles, and their irrepressible will to live prepares them to struggle for a better life. Many of Aini's works have been translated into the languages of the peoples of the USSR, and into European and Oriental languages as well.

Sadriddin Aini

In the Village

IN THE VILLAGE

THE VERY BEGINNING*

I spent my childhood in two villages rather distant from each other and quite unlike in customs and appearance. Before I speak about myself, I will tell of these villages, for that, about which I wish to write, took place precisely there.

The village of Saktare stood on the bank of the Zeravshan about five miles from Gijduvan, the center of Gijduvan province. The Mazrangan Canal flowed through the village, providing an abundance of water for the fertile earth which allowed the local people to have fine orchards, vineyards, and truck gardens in which everything from various fruits and vegetables to thirsty rice-plants grew in profusion.

In Saktare, different peoples had lived together from days of old: there were Tajiks and Arabs—descendants of former nomads, migrants from Urgench, settlers from Persian Meshkhed, people from the ancient fortress of Gijduvan, and Uzbeks from Saidato in Shafrikan province. Most of the people in Saktare spoke Tajik, but the Arabs and the folks from Saidato preferred Uzbek. The peasants had but paltry holdings or no land at all; most of the land around Saktare was the property of two of the Persians, whom the villagers referred to as Allah's messengers or judges.

All the people of Saktare were either share-croppers or artisans. The Tajiks worked the emir's lands, while those from Urgench preferred to keep small groceries, and hadjis of every description engaged in fortune-telling and healing. Everyone for miles around brought their sick and insane to the hadjis to be treated. These wise men effected their cures by mysterious incantations. After the morning prayers, the elderly hadjis would remain in the mosque and chant the Prayer for Victory in sing-song voices. The afflicted from villages all around gathered there in hopes that they would be made whole by the mere act of listening to the prayer.

The village mosque had a school where lessons were held in winter and summer alike, and likewise, there was a small madrasah at which more comprehensive lessons were offered. Because of these two modest schools, Saktare boasted more literate and educated people than anywhere else around.

The two large landowners of the area were responsible for the maintenance of the schools and the mosque, while all the official posts at the local level were held by prosperous Tajiks.

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My father and grandfather were Saktare hadjis by birth.

The other village of my childhood, Makhallai Bala in Shafrikan province, was about a mile to the northwest of Gijduvan Fortress on the edge of the shifting sands which stretched to the Kyzyl Kum Desert.

There was never enough water in Makhallai Bala, and after the sand dunes spilled over into the ancient river bed of the Shafrikan, the village was left with almost no water at all.

There were no fine orchards here, just sour apples known as Hadjihoni. Only grapevines would grow well in the burning desert sands, and there were occasional patches of other crops.

Because there was no water, vegetables grew poorly, and people planted wheat, rye, millet, and beans instead. Even plain cotton was stunted with only one or two bolls forming on each plant.

This was a poverty-stricken village with squalid adobe huts, and although everyone farmed, no one could make ends meet on agricultural profits alone. Many harvests were too small even to cover taxes, especially since the landowners took the lion's share of every one, despite the fact that their proper share was ten per cent of the total yield, a sum long agreed upon.

Most of the land thereabouts belonged to the emir, and the rest was held by the famous Miri-Arab Madrasah in Bukhara. So the peasants who worked that land gave either the emir or the madrasah their ten per cents. But the rich men of the area did not pay any taxes at all since they were close to the rulers of Bukhara: the poor bore the whole brunt of this financial burden which made their situation even more desperate.

There were almost no skilled craftsmen in Makhallai Bala except the cobblers, who patched the worn-out footwear of customers as poor and hungry as they themselves. In the Dekhnau Abdulladjan, the center of the village, worked cobblers who could resole or sew the legs of old boots, but the second-hand dealers reigned supreme here and deprived them of even this meager source of income.

Some managed to get by herding the rich men's flocks, while others worked as farm hands or gathered firewood. In winter time, almost everyone engaged in cleaning the merchants' cotton. But they received a mere pittance for their work, and more often than not, the hulls, which could be burned for firewood, were considered compensation enough.

My mother came from this village.

Saktare and Makhallai Bala were a bit more than ten miles apart, while both villages were approximately twenty-five miles from Bukhara, Saktare to the northeast, and Makhallai Bala to the north.

and pillows, but the mill-stones he sold.

And thus I spent my childhood, wintering in Makhallai Bala and going to Saktare, where I was born, for the summer.

AFTER THE FEAST*

After the feast demanded by tradition in honor of the circumcision of myself and my brother to which the entire village was invited, our household came upon hard times. I wasn't affected directly, but I learned about what was going on from the conversations between my mother and father. They were repeated every evening. One day, discussing his debts with Mother, Father said:

"It's a good thing I didn't borrow from the money-lenders and didn't listen to those who offered to lend me what I needed against our land in Saktare. If I had done so, we would have lost everything there."

"You mean you managed to borrow the money without interest?"

"Of course! I borrowed a little from everyone—no more than twenty or thirty coppers from each person. The most I borrowed was from your father—fifty coppers he had set aside for his funeral shroud and to cover the expenses of burying him."

"Oh!"

"He told me not to worry about the money: 'As long as you give it back before I die, all's well and good! Just don't let my younger son Alikhan know I lent you the money.' So be sure you don't tell a soul!" Father warned her.

"So you got all the money without interest, then?" Mother asked sceptically.

"I borrowed only from our close friends and relatives in Saktare. They told me: 'That's hardly enough money to worry about—consider it a gift!' But I told them each in turn: 'I couldn't hear of such a thing! In my hour of need, you've lent me money at no interest, and that's already present enough. Of course, I'll pay you back. After all, you're no better off than I am!' "

"It would have been better to hold the circumcision feast in Saktare," my mother remarked with displeasure. "It wouldn't have cost us as much. Here the people are all so hungry they could eat a hundred helpings of rice pilaff and still not fill their bellies."

"That's not true!" my father objected. "Not at all. The amount of expenses

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doesn't depend on how hungry the guests are but on their wealth and social position. No matter what you give a poor man, he'll gobble it down with relish. But even if you place a multitude of tasty dishes before a rich man, he'll get angry and say they must not respect me if the hospitality they proffer is so meager. Even if we had spent three times more on the feast in Saktare, the local wealthies would not have been satisfied. After all, such men don't come to eat, but for the honor of having mountains of food piled up in front of them. They want to see sugar-loaves and to be given fine robes as gifts. Could we have afforded all that? You can figure out for yourself how much that would have cost!"

Father paused for a moment, then continued:

"And you should bear in mind that in Saktare, I rarely visit anyone but close kin. We never live there in the winter, and that's when most of the feasts are held. On the other hand, I've been to feasts in almost every home here. So it was only proper that we show our gratitude for all the fine meals we've eaten here.

And all the relatives from Saktare came for the feast anyway, so no one was insulted."

"A whole year has passed since the feast. Have you paid everyone back?"

"No. Only your father and two other men who needed the money badly."

"Why were you in such a hurry to pay back my father? He would have waited."

"Who knows which of us will die first? Money is sweeter to old men. He may have been sitting there thinking about those miserable coppers every night. So I paid him back as soon as I could to preserve his peace of mind."

Father fell into a pensive silence, then went on:

"I'm not telling you all this to upset you, but to warn you not to lose heart if we have to live more modestly for a while. Buy a little less meat at the bazaar, or maybe none at all. Until all our debts are paid, we can get by on milk products. All we'll buy at the bazaar is a little rice in case someone happens to drop by on bazaar day. Then we'll have something to feed our guests at least."

"We don't need to buy any rice yet."

"Why not?" asked Father in surprise.

"We have plenty."

"And where did it come from?" inquired Father in amazement.

Mother replied with a smile:

"When the rice was brought for the feast, I put aside a sack for a rainy day. It's hidden in the trunk. The main thing now is to pay off our debts."

"What a wise woman you've been," Father praised her. "After all, as they say: If you economize at home, you can become a merchant in India!"

My brother was sleeping beside me. I thought I was the only one who had heard my parents' conversation, but suddenly he buried his head in the pillow and began to cry bitterly.

Father and Mother rushed over to him in alarm and asked:

"What's wrong with you? Why are you crying?"

"How will I ever get to the madrasah to study now? We have no money! Why did we have to give that stupid circumcision feast?"

"Don't cry, son. When the time comes, I'll take you to Bukhara myself," Father replied.

"How can you take me there to study when we have no money?"

"It's still two years before you'll be old enough to enter the madrasah. By that time, we'll have paid off all our debts, and you can set off for Bukhara to study along with the other boys your age. Don't worry about that now!"

THE HALVA MAKER'S*

My mother was making halva, and I was helping her. First she browned some flour in a big copper pot, then she boiled a cup of molasses from Saktare; when it was the consistency of soup, she added it to the flour. The mixture thickened to the consistency of bread dough. Mother sprinkled some flour on a plate, put the halva dough on it, and cut me a piece after it had cooled and hardened. The rest she cut into equal pieces, sprinkled flour on the top of each, and put them in a little box.

Munching on my piece with great delight, I went outside and met my brother coming in. He said:

"That's not real halva! It's more like bread crusts! Real halva is soft and oily!"

"Where did you ever eat soft halva?"

"At our grandfather's. Uncle Kubran Nivaz brought it. Would you eat it if someone gave it to you? It tastes good!"

"If anyone ever gives me some, I'll eat it for sure! But for the time being, I'll eat this."

"If I get you some, will you eat it?"

"Sure!"

"Then if you want some, go ask Father, 'Buy me some soft halva!'"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"I'm afraid he'll say that if he gives me any money now, there won't be any left for me to go to the madrasah in Bukhara."

"I want to go to Bukhara, too."

"You're still too little. Father will make more money before it's time for you to go. And by then, he'll have forgotten about the halva."

"I'll go ask him now!"

We both walked into my father's workshop. Still munching on my piece, I said:

"Please buy me some soft halva cooked in oil!"

Without taking his eyes off his shuttle, he answered:

"There's oil in the halva you're eating, and it's still fresh and fairly soft. So what kind of halva is it you want exactly?"

"I want some soft halva cooked in oil that tastes good—a kind I never had before."

"If you never ate it before, how do you know it tastes good?"

"My brother said so."

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1984

Muhiddin ran out of the workshop, for I had inadvertently given him away. Father laughed.

"Go tell your mother to bring your brother out here."

I went to tell my mother what he had said and found my brother hiding behind her skirts. He asked me in a threatening tone:

"Why did you give me away?"

I knew he was right, but my pride kept me from admitting it, so I asked him:

"And how would you have answered?"

Not knowing what to say in reply, he blushed. Of course, there was no other possible answer. Mother took him to my father, although he protested vehemently. We wondered how Father would punish him for putting me up to asking for the halva.

But Father laughed, took off his glasses, wiped them, and asked:

"Muhiddin, do you know where Balai Rud is?"

"Yes."

"And you know where the mill by the river bank is?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

My brother nodded his head. Father looked at Mother and continued:

"They asked me for soft halva cooked in oil. Today is bazaar day, so you don't have to do any cooking today. I was afraid that if Muhiddin didn't know where Balai Rud is, I might have to go after the halva myself. But since he knows, let him go and get it. And you can sit and spin me some thread—I'm almost out."

Father dug a coin out of his pocket and handed it to my brother. He gave further instructions:

"After you cross the stream, you'll come to a bridge. Go to the other side, and you'll see a big house. That's where Barot lives. He makes halva there. Go inside the house, and tell him I send my greetings. Ask him to give you a stick of halva. Wrap it up in a piece of paper and bring it home."

"How much is a stick?"

"A whole piece."

"Who's going to eat it, me or my brother?"

Father measured with his hands how big it would be, and added:

"It will be more than big enough for all of us."

My brother got ready to go, and I asked permission to accompany him. So we set off for the village of Balai Rud to get the halva.

Slipping and sliding merrily across the snowy ground, we soon reached the river.

Balai Rud was located above the stream on the northern shore of the Shafrikan. To the south, the stream flowed into the river, and just above it stood the mill. When the river was up, it turned the mill-stone.

But when we reached the mill, the stream was dry, and there were only puddles of ice glistening in the river. I asked my brother to show me the mill, and he agreed, so we had a look around and continued on our way.

We did not cross the bridge, but jumped and slipped over the ice. We reached the far shore and went into the courtyard with its gates facing the bridge. In the center of the yard was a large adobe building about four times bigger than an ordinary house.

We opened one of the doors and went in. There was a row of hearths with copper pots hanging over them. In some of the pots, molasses was boiling, and others contained soapwort sap, which can be beaten to a foam with a bundle of twigs. Over the far hearth hung an ordinary pot with boiling oil.

At one of the pots stood a man pouring flour that had already been browned into it, and two others were stirring the thickening mass with wooden paddles. They tossed it into the air with their paddles, turned it over quickly, and let it fall back into the pot again.

A tall man with a long black beard was in charge. There was a long platform in the other part of the room with a wooden trough some two meters in length. Goatskins were spread all around this enormous vessel, and nearby stood a huge bin of flour.

The halva-maker walked up to the bin, took some flour from it with a big copper scoop, and sprinkled it all over the bottom of the trough. Then he went over to the pot where flour was being mixed with the thick, boiled molasses, and made sure his helpers were doing their jobs properly. When the dough had thickened, he cried:

"That's enough! Bring it over here, now!"

And picking the dough up with their paddles, the assistants laid it out into the wooden trough.

Only then did the halva-maker look at us:

"What do you want?"

My brother proffered him the coin and passed on Father's greetings:

"Father sent us for one stick of halva."

"I sold all the halva I made this morning at the bazaar. So wait a little, and there'll soon be a fresh stick for you. Meanwhile sit over there so you can see how it's made."

The dough slowly spread out, filling the entire trough.

The men standing by the pots left them, washed their hands and arms up to the elbows, and sat down on the goatskins around the trough. Their master also took his place on a skin, leaving only one boy standing by the flour bin with a scoop in his hand.

The men rolled the dough into a long snake. They joined the ends and made

a ring. Then, bending over the trough, they rolled and rolled the ring until it stretched all the way around the edge of the trough. Next, the boy took a scoop of flour and sprinkled it on the ring.

The men flipped one end of the ring over to make a figure eight, then put one half of the eight on top of the other.

Now there were two rings, and again, the boy sprinkled flour on the dough.

This ring was also folded in half. It was smaller, but now there were four layers.

And thus, the men continued their work.

The third time the ring was folded, there were eight layers; the fourth time, there were sixteen; the fifth, thirty-two; the sixth, sixty-four; the seventh time, there were already a hundred and twenty-eight layers. The eighth, there were two hundred and fifty-six; the ninth, five hundred and twelve, and finally, the tenth time, there were one thousand twenty-four paper-thin layers.

The men kept rolling and folding the halva until it had been done twenty-five times.

Then, the halva-maker straightened up with relief and announced:

"That's enough!"

Then, taking his knife, he began to cut the ring into pieces, each about half an arm in length.

He put one piece on the scales standing in the corner, but it wasn't big enough, so he took a bit from another piece, and the scales balanced.

He wrapped up the big piece in some paper and gave it to my brother:

"Take this to your father."

He cut the smaller piece in half and gave one to each of us:

"And this is for you."

We hurried home, for night was falling.

MIKHAIL STELMAKH

(b. 1912)

Mikhail Stelmakh, a Soviet Ukrainian writer, was born into the family of a poor peasant in the village of Dyakovtsy, presently in Vinnitsa Region. He graduated from high school and then from the Vinnitsa Teachers' Training College in 1933. He worked as a teacher until 1939. He was a soldier in an artillery unit during World War II. After sustaining serious wounds, he spent a long time in the hospital and after his release in 1944, went to work as a war correspondent for a front-line newspaper. After the war, he joined the staff of the Institute of Art Criticism, Folklore, and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR. His first publications date back to 1936.

The collection of verse *Good Morning* (1941) is a reflection of the lives of young people of that time. Even in that early book, some of the highly individual features of Stelmakh's style were evident: the poeticizing of the pursuits of ordinary people, ties with the symbolism of Ukrainian folklore, and everyday life in the Ukrainian countryside. The wartime collections of verse—*For Clear Sunrises* (1942), *Budding Spring* (1942), and *May the Ukraine Live Free!* (1944)—expressed the thoughts and feelings of a Soviet patriot. His post-war books of verse are devoted mainly to Ukrainian farmers and to the great natural beauty of the Ukraine.

Stelmakh is also the author of stories and novels. His first collection of short stories, *Birch Sap*, came out in 1944. His novels depict the major events which marked life in the Ukrainian countryside in this century: the revolution of 1905-1907 (*Bread and Salt*, 1959), the struggle for Soviet government (*Blood Runs Thicker Than Water*, 1957), the socialist transformation of the countryside in the 1920s and 30s, the war against nazi Germany (*Big Family*, 1949-1951), the hard lot of the peasants in the first few years after the war (*Straight and Crooked*, 1961), and the world as seen through the eyes of a village boy (*The Swans Are Flying*, 1964). The story included in this collection is about the Ukraine in the early 20s, shortly after the Civil War. Stelmakh's prose is both lyrical and romantic with an abundance of allusions to folklore. The language is often metaphorical. Stelmakh also writes dramas and screen plays. His works have been translated into many languages of the USSR and the world.

Mikhail Stelmakh

The Swans Are Flying

THE SWANS ARE FLYING...*

The swans were flying right over our house.

They were flying well below the scattered, low-hanging clouds, and a restive sound, like the pealing of distant bells, floated down to earth. My grandfather said it was the swan wings singing. I watched as they loomed overhead, listening to the ringing sound, and I wanted to fly away after the swans. I raised my arms as if they were wings, and instantly, was covered by a cloak of sadness and joy and the silver chiming of beating pinions.

I felt as though I was shrinking, and everything around me was increasing in size, growing larger and changing before my very eyes: the white clouds in the sky and the creaking well-sweeps who wouldn't fly anywhere, the jolly green patches of moss on the roofs, the bluish oak grove beyond the village, and finally, the rich black earth, still wet from the morning fog, which was finally peeking out from under the snow.

The whole world trembled and floated before me as the swans became no more than specks on the horizon. I didn't want them to fly away and leave us. If, by some miracle, the birds had yielded to my desire, they would have circled above the village and flown over our cottage again. If I had been a sorcerer, surely they would have returned at my command! All I would have had to do was say the magic word! I grew pensive, and suddenly, I was surrounded by a vision of the mysterious fairy tale with its dense forests and geese-swans who bear a small boy away on their powerful wings. The thought of this fairy tale puts the very word in my mouth which the earth and water, the birds in the sky, and the firmament itself obeyed...

Just then, something miraculous was happening above my head: some unseen hand had drawn a bow across the blue sky and white clouds, and the air was filled with the sweet sound of a violin. I threw back my head and couldn't believe my eyes: the swans were flying above our humble abode once more! What had happened? Had they heard the magic word I whispered, circled above the village and returned at my command, or was it a different flock?!

The music of the violin and the silver tinkling that soared above my childhood, rang out louder and louder; it bore my soul upward on white wings and carried it off into the mysterious distance. Small creature that I was in the wide world, I was filled with joy and a strange elation...

"Quack, quack, quack," squawked our old duck as she rubbed against my leg. She had a broken wing that hadn't healed properly. Something had excited

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

her, for she twisted her limber neck back and forth, gazing up at the sky first with one beady, black eye, then with the other, flapping her one good wing. She was trying to tell me something important, but the only word she knew was the "Quack, quack, quack!" she kept repeating over and over.

The swans had disappeared somewhere beyond the tall, slender belfry, which also strove heavenward, but I could still sense the beating of their wings deep within me... Or perhaps it was the bells in the belfry, responding in sympathetic harmony...

"The swans have brought us life on their beating wings," my grandfather Demyan said to the heaven and earth; in his hand glittered a plane with which he had been fashioning spokes for wagon wheels.

"How can they bring life?" I asked in surprise.

"They are harbingers of spring and bring new life on their wings, my little grandson. Just wait and see: now everything will start to come to life around us. The ice on the rivers and lakes will begin to melt, and the sap will rise in the trees. The rumble of thunder will quicken in the silent clouds of winter, and the sun will unlock the frozen earth with its magic keys."

"What kind of keys does the sun have, Grampa?" I asked, even more amazed, because I had never guessed that the sun might carry keys in its pocket just like the grown-ups around me did.

"The sun has keys of gold, my boy! Shiny golden keys to unlock the earth."

"How does the sun unlock the earth with its keys?"

"One fine day it peeks through its window at the earth far below and sees that the earth and all the people and animals and birds are pining for spring. The whole world is tired of the winter snows. So the Sun asks brother Moon if it isn't time to unlock the earth. The Moon nods its head, and the Sun smiles and sends its rays beaming down on the forests and meadows. These sunrays know how to unlock the fields and water from the ice of winter. And all it takes is golden sunbeams..."

I listened attentively to my grandfather, but suddenly I grew very frightened.

"But Grampa, what if the sun loses its keys like Mama does sometimes?"

"What's that, boy?" he asked, and his old eyes began to sparkle like immortelles besprinkled with dew.

He raised his eyebrows in amazement then gave me a light push with his free hand and burst out laughing. When overcome by mirth, he would have a good belly laugh, grabbing onto the fence, the gate, the edge of the cottage, or a tree for support. And if there was nothing to grab on to, he would press his hands to his flat stomach. At such moments, he seemed to break in two. His full moustache would poke out at odd angles, great guffaws would roll from his mouth, and he would exclaim, "Lord have mercy on my soul!" Sawdust would

fly from his clothes, and bucketfuls of tears would stream from his gray eyes.

I calmed down, because I realized that if Grandfather was laughing so, the sun couldn't possibly lose its keys: they were probably tied to a string around its neck or wrist. That was how everybody should keep track of keys so there wouldn't be any wailing or bother when they were lost.

"Where did the swans fly off to, Grampa?"

"To calm waters and clear sunrises," he replied seriously when he had finished laughing. He motioned for me to go back inside and headed for the shed to finish the wheel he was working on.

"Quack, quack, quack!" agreed the old duck and cocked her head once more to gaze at the sky with one eye.

I stood in the middle of the yard, understanding my grandfather's words in my own way. The dense oak grove before me beckoned like an open gate. The distant calm waters and stars stuck to their surface drew closer to me. Places I had never been. I was drawn to them irresistibly along the winding path my young life followed like a child's ball coursing downhill.

How I longed to make my way to distant forests and gaze from some unknown shore at those swans as though cast of silver, to peer at their ringing wings which had picked up the spring in some far-off warm lands and brought it to us... But who would go with me, and where would I find boots for such a long journey?

Only then did I glance down at my bare feet, blue with cold, sigh mightily, and head for home so I wouldn't get my ears boxed. I was having a hard time of it, for no sooner would I run out of the house barefooted than I would get cuffed soundly and be called a good-for-nothing lazybones to boot. But what was I to do? After all, in those far-off days, not even every grown-up had a pair of boots to his name. If I protested, I would get cuffed again and called more names and reminded that the belt with the copper buckle was waiting for the chance to lick my rump, the devil take the accursed thing, copper buckle and all!

I remember once I got chewed out for no reason when the weather just started getting cold. Then the whole hill and all the iced-over roads near the church were covered with children on sleds and wooden skates. They made the skates by planing pieces of birch or maple wood the length of their boot soles, making a notch for the heel, and running a wire—the thicker the better—along the bottom. It was simple enough to make such wooden skates, and oh, the fun everyone had with them!

I stood by the window watching everyone else have a good time, waiting for the proper moment, then quietly sneaked off to the corridor, grabbed the wash tub from under the millstone, tied a rope to it, and ran off barefooted to

play with the other boys. No one was surprised that I had turned up with such tackle, for we used anything we could find for sledding and skating: only a few of the kids had sleds and skates. Most of us made do with sheets of tin for sledding and pieces of old cow bone or horseshoes for skates. Ivan, Uncle Mikola's son, slid down the hill on an old bench turned upside down. The main thing was to have a good time, and when you took a tumble, not to howl, but to have a good laugh with all the rest.

How wonderful it was to go to the very top of the hill, glance victoriously at the smoking chimneys of the snow-covered village, sit in my own private airplane, and fly like a bird to the very bottom! As my contraption raced along, the wind whistled in my ears, the dogs beside the path barked at me, and the church bells rang merrily. The cottages all about seemed to shake and jump about, the whole earth trembled, and proud as a king, I sat on my feet to keep them from getting too cold, and whizzed past the girls and the more timid boys. Then, racing along at top speed, I crashed into someone's sled and went flying into the soft snow like a ball. Someone behind toppled into me, and soon there was such a pile-up that everyone was laughing, squealing, trying to climb to the top of the heap, and tumbling to the bottom of the hill.

At that point, I was dragged by the collar into the bright light of day, and immediately, everything went dark before my eyes: my mother's face was pale with terror and anger. Everyone stared at me as if I had come from the moon. Someone brought my mother the tub which had gotten cracked somehow. She tucked it under her arm, and without any further ado, dragged me straight from my games to my retribution. I wanted to run anywhere, to hide from her, but her hand seemed glued to my collar. Where had the joy of a moment before vanished to as I trudged home before my mother and the cracked tub?

You can imagine what happened next: I got the foolishness knocked right out of me and was told over and over what a dunce and rogue I was. More words were used, and some really stung, but I didn't try to object, because I knew all it would get me was an extra cuff or two. Then Mother wrapped her kerchief around my neck, bundled me up on the shelf of the big brick stove where the millet was drying, and made me drink cups and cups of raspberry tea which would have tasted wonderful with even a bit of sugar.

By the next day, it was apparent that the devil had no intentions of carrying me off to his lair, because I hadn't coughed once during the night. So Grampa noted that I was a scamp, just like he had been as a boy, and Mother said I was a demon in disguise. Grandfather and I exchanged glances, Mother shook her fist at me, and Granny decided to take her good-for-nothing grandson to church. There I was to repent wholeheartedly and learn some sense, of which I didn't seem to have quite enough. This did not grieve me overly, since I had heard many

times that sense was something many grown-ups were lacking in as well. Lots of them were missing a few marbles or had some screws loose; some didn't have the sense God gave a brass billy goat, and a lot of the others obviously weren't playing with a full deck...

On the appointed morning, I was blissful as could be, for Mother borrowed a neighbor's boots for an hour, smeared birch tar on them, and told me how to behave in church: I wasn't to fidget, snuffle, gape, leave my grandmother's side, laugh, giggle, go near the choir stalls, or forget to cross myself. After finding out everything I was forbidden to do in church, I dashed outside and raced ahead of my granny then fell behind, while she was determined to drag me along by the hand. Why is it all grown-ups forget that boys will be boys?!

Before entering the church, Granny bowed piously, as was the custom, and I did the same, but obviously, my attempts to imitate her were not to her liking, for she immediately spat out the few derogatory epithets I had been spared the day of my misdeed. The interior of the church smelled to high heaven with freshly tanned sheepskins and warm candlewax. In the narthex and everywhere else, people were praying, and the church elder clumsily made his way among them: this was a man feared by every kid in the village. Now he was carrying out two tasks at once: collecting the offering and putting out the candles that had burned low before the icons. His thick lips were broad and flat: all he had to do was give a little puff to put out the candle and make the saint's visage behind it vanish.

People said the elder had made a bundle on burnt out candle-ends alone. Such rumors angered him greatly, so he argued that he would soon be impoverished by the church and the "hard times we're having". However, as near as anyone could see, the wolves of poverty were not yet howling at the elder's gates: or if they were, they would have had plenty to feed on, for he had a horse, several cows, sheep, pigs, and a number of fowl. And then too, it wasn't exactly as if the rest of us had been spared by the "hard times": all the elder's walls were papered with the currency of those "hard times", the larger denominations closer to the icon corner, and the smaller ones near the washstand.

Granny lit a homemade candle before some time-blackened icon and prayed fervently until she remembered that she had to show me the terrifying scene of the Last Judgement and Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This awe-inspiring rendition of doomsday was painted directly on the wooden wall of the narthex. The sweating of the damp wood made the picture even more horrifying, for righteous men and sinners alike were weeping with all their hearts.

Everything imaginable was depicted in the mural of the Last Judgement! On a rainbow which spanned the picture like a yoke sat Christ the Almighty in all His majesty. Beneath Him, a plump hand was tossing good and evil onto

the scales. To the sides of the Almighty stood the Prophets, and Virgin, and John the Baptist on gleaming white clouds. To the left, below these glorious figures, was Heaven, surrounded by a thick stone wall. Saint Peter was leading the Righteous to the Gates of Heaven, within whose walls stood three bearded Forefathers and a crowd of merry Zaporozhian Cossacks, all armed and wearing the traditional wide red breeches. Their shaven heads sported long forelocks.

To the right were the horrors of Hell: a crowd of pitch-black devils was flanked by a fire-breathing dragon whose open jaws were being approached by a group of sinners, pale with terror: there was a drunkard with a cask of moonshine, a pompous lord who had grown fat on the misery of others, a thieving miller with a millstone hung round his neck, a bribe-taking judge weighted down by the sack of dishonest money, a fallen monk who had neglected the Holy Writ in favor of earthly pleasures, and in the midst of this sinful throng, a heavily made-up, well-dressed, haughty lady with the word "Arrogance" written at her feet. Behind her writhed and cowered liars and informers with spade-like tongues, and all manner of petty evil-doers who had failed to lead upright lives.

Although the visages of these degraded souls were terrible to look upon, I forced myself to examine the scene carefully and was relieved to note that among the damned, I did not see the barefooted simpleton who had slid down the hill in a washtub. That gave me some comfort, at least...

"Mikhailo, haven't you gone back inside yet?!" my grandfather shouted from the shed. "Watch out, or we'll both get it because of your swans!" he added, looking up for some reason at the sun and the blue sky dotted with clouds.

I sighed once more to comfort myself and make my grandfather feel sorry for poor little barefooted me. Thinking my own thoughts, I began to wipe my feet on the worn little millstone that stood by the door. By the mound of earth that ran along the outer walls of our hut was the hole our duck lived in during the summer months. She, too, having heard the beating of the swans' wings, could feel the approaching warmth of spring and was examining her little nook. Although our duck had only one good wing, her bravery and sharp wit amazed all the neighbors. In the spring when the chicks hatched, she was always bustling about the broods of the hens. And if she were to see a crow anywhere, she would quack and squawk at it, threatening it with her single wing and driving the hunter away in search of easier prey.

Our duck was a good judge of character as well. If a nice person appeared at the gate, we would hear a cheerful greeting of friendly quacking. If such a person were to enter the house, the duck would sidle along, accompanying him to the door like the real mistress of the house. But if the scowling skinflint Mitrofanenko or the cunning twaddler Yukhrim Babenko were so much

as to show themselves on our street, the duck would stomp angrily and squawk hoarsely.

"You wingless plague, you!" Mitrofanenko would hiss at her from the gate, and a spot would appear on the bridge of his nose. "Go away and leave me alone!"

But Yukhrim Babenko would put a sickly-sweet smile on his face which had cheeks round as flat cakes, spread his long arms, and sigh in feigned amazement:

"Where in the world did you ever find such an interesting and charming creature as this duck? Look how fast she can stomp her little feet! If you put her in a mortar, she'll have your millet ground for you in a flash!"

"Why don't you pick on somebody your own size, you old bully!" retorted my grandfather, looking askance at him.

"Each person has his own temper, character, and reason," replied Yukhrim, not very offended. "You'll be hearing a lot about me yet in this village—and not just in the village, for that matter!"

Yukhrim, a former clerk, made himself scarce as hen's teeth when it came to working, but he loved to start a squabble or row in which he could demonstrate his quick wit. Yukhrim's tiny head was always busily thinking of ways to turn a quick profit, for his money-grubbing soul could smell cash even under a thick layer of ice. It was only later, when I got to know the cunning, petty nature of Yukhrim Babenko, that I understood my grandfather's saying: "A hundred friends isn't enough, but a single enemy is one too many!.."

I shrunk against the doorpost and wondered again how I would manage to sneak into the house unnoticed. It would be good if someone came to visit or if Mama started singing. Then her face and eyes would be filled with melancholy and I could scamper onto the stove-shelf and hide my wet feet until they dried or sit there whittling and not making a sound. But no one was coming to visit us, and not a note could be heard from within. My feet were already half-frozen, so whether I wanted to or not, I had to go inside, and Mother was sure to see me come in. I already knew I would get chewed out royally. But I knew how to deal with her: the main thing was not to object, not even with my expression, but to stand there repentantly with my head lowered, say I was sorry, and then change the subject unexpectedly with a question that would make her forget all about my misdeeds. This was a good tactic and worked most of the time.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps coming down the street, felt instantly relieved, and looked to see not who was approaching, but what kind of boots he was wearing, because when you don't have any boots of your own, you look at another person from the feet up.

Striding along right next to the fence where it was a bit drier was the chairman of the Poor Peasants' Committee, Uncle Sebastian. My spirits rose at once.

"Good morning, my boy!" he exclaimed when he saw me. Tall and well-built, he wore a smart cavalry greatcoat. I could see a pistol poking out under the coat. "What are you doing out in the cold, with your teeth chattering like a blacksmith shoeing a horse?"

"Ha, ha..." I giggled.

"So you can still laugh, I see!" he said, shaking his head in mock anger. His fiery forelock flopped back and forth above his brows, and he tried to poke it back under his old army cap. "Why are you standing there barefooted?"

"Don't you know why? We have no money to buy boots for me."

"Then stay put on the stove-shelf—otherwise you'll catch your death of a cold! And stop making the door creak! The hinges are old and rusty enough as it is!" thundered Uncle Sebastian. But I kept swinging the door back and forth. "Will you look at that! Barefooted as a hant and he stands there with a grin on his face!"

"Birds go around barefooted, too, and they do all right!" I replied with a laugh.

What could Uncle Sebastian say to that? Nothing, so he squinted and started laughing, too. We enjoyed watching each other laugh, even though one of us had boots and the other only dreamed of owning a pair.

"Uncle Sebastian, have you got a gun on you?"

"How do you know?" asked the chairman in surprise.

"A little bird told me."

"It would be better if the little bird would tell you where to get some boots."

"Did you take it off the bandits?"

"Yes."

"How does it shoot?"

"Pretty well."

"Boy, would I like to shoot it just once. I'd give anything to shoot a gun like that!" I exclaimed, squinting with pleasure as I imagined how I would take aim and fire.

"You should find some other way of amusing yourself. It would be far better if neither you nor I knew anything about such dangerous toys."

But I didn't believe Uncle Sebastian in the least, although he was a kind and honest man. After all, it was such a thrilling sight—the Red Cossacks decked out in all their military finery with sabers and carbines and even spears: one could stab, another could shoot, and a third could pierce the black hearts of seven enemies at once like the Cossack in the poster! Those poor devils couldn't do a thing but jerk, the black top hats tumbling from their unworthy heads. But after all, it was a known fact that grown-ups don't always tell kids the truth. That's something we are quite used to.

Uncle Sebastian was leaning on the gate, so I moved closer to him. He squinted his oblong eyes and wondered how to grab me over the gate. But I whooped and jumped away, then moved closer again, and the whole game started over.

We were both enjoying this game immensely, although I glanced at the window from time to time to make sure no one was watching. Finally, Uncle Sebastian gave up trying to catch me and pulled a crumpled letter out of his pocket.

"Here! It's from your pa. Take it in to your mother right away."

"Thanks a lot. Why don't you come in for a minute and give Mama the letter yourself?" I asked, thinking how nice that would be for everyone: my mother and grandparents would fuss over him, and the tears and laughter would begin. While all the bustle was going on, I could cuddle up to Uncle Sebastian and look at his pistol to my heart's content.

"I'm sorry, boy, but I don't have time. Other people are waiting for me," he replied, dashing my hopes.

"That's too bad," I said, and dashed headlong into the house so they would be sure to see the letter before they noticed my feet. "Mama, look, a letter from Pa!"

"Oh my God!" she moaned, and closed her eyes. The spindle fell from her hands, hit the floor and began to unwind as it rolled. "From your father, you say?"

"Yes, it's from Pa!" I replied victoriously, because no one would give a thought to my feet now.

Mother pressed her hands to her chest, then examined the letter from all sides in confusion. She even sniffed it:

"It smells of tobacco. Maybe you can make something out, son?"

"I'm sorry, Mama, but I can only read block letters. I haven't learned cursive yet," I admitted sadly.

"Why couldn't they always write the same! Then you could read it for us!" Mother grieved, then ordered me: "Run and fetch Uncle Mikola, son. He'll read us the letter."

"But I don't have any boots, Mama," I said, looking at my feet and growing taller with hope, but I decided to push my luck: "It's so muddy everywhere now..."

"Take my boots, and hurry up!" Mother replied, taking off her worn boots with yellow shafts and black vamps.

Ecstatic, I grabbed the boots, wrapped the foot-cloths around my feet with trembling hands, and was soon standing there like an inveterate Cossack. It didn't matter in the least that the boots were too big for me or that they were such an odd color.

"Well, how do I look, Mama?" I asked, clicking the heels.

But at that moment, Mother could not have cared less about my bliss. She looked at me sternly and commanded:

"Now off with you, and be quick about it!"

"Don't worry, I'll be back in a flash!"

When you're wearing boots, your feet carry you forward of their own accord, as if they were wings. So I flew out of the house, shouting something gleefully to Grampa, and slapping the boot shafts, stiff with wear and age. The music they made in response to my slaps was sweeter than the sound of a thousand silver bells. But for some reason, Grampa did not share in my joy: his careworn figure stayed bent over the wheel as I flew out of the gate, spattering thick spring mud everywhere.

Now I could sing like a real Cossack:

On our narrow little street,
To see green grass is such a treat!

Our street really was narrow, and it was crooked to boot! In the spring, when evening fell on its ruts and fresh green grass, it looked more like a river or a long bridge than a road. From behind their wattle fences, speckled cherry trees greeted passers-by, and white and blue cottages peeked out sadly or gaily from behind them. The people on our street grew corn, but they all knew some trade besides: they were carpenters or cobblers, wheelwrights, coopers, or millstone-makers.

The finest artisan in the village was my grandfather Demyan, who was known all over the district. He could do anything with his hands! He could fashion chaff-cutters, hulling mills, clever gears, or millet-mills if only he had metal, wood, and a nip of vodka at the tavern in the evenings. If someone needed a windmill, he could build one that would reach the clouds; he could forge an axe at the blacksmith's, make a wagon or a sleigh and decorate them with carved wooden flowers too.

Wood and metal sang in my grandfather's strong hands. He could carve saint and sinner from wood with only the simplest of tools. Our neighbors had many a chuckle over a wood carving of Saints Peter and Paul our landlord commissioned from him. Grandfather's Peter and Paul were no glum, sanctimonious hypocrites but mighty bearded men with laughing eyes holding, by tradition, the Bible and the keys to Heaven in their strong hands.

In the evenings, Granny wouldn't go near the shed where they stood for fear they would start talking to her. The local people recognized them for what they were: our wonderful great-grandfathers Debelyuk and Marushchak. The two figures graced the entrance to our local landlord's mansion, but the stingy gentleman, who was accustomed to getting everything for free, did not pay his former serf so much as a copper for them. When Grandfather reminded the rich man of his debt, the latter only laughed and said:

"But Demyan, don't you realize what a great honor it is to have a lord like me indebted to a mere peasant like you!? Isn't that payment enough?"

But here, Grandfather showed his mettle. At night he stole the apostles from the mansion's front porch and chopped them to bits. The next morning, a crowd gathered in our yard to have a look at the heads, beards, trunks, and legs of the saints piled up next to the shed. When the other artisans reproached him for chopping up the apostles, Grandfather dismissed them with a wave of his hand and said:

"If I hadn't chopped them up, they'd still be standing before his palace. Better grief alone should stand there!"

Soon the enraged lord arrived with his servants to collect the figures. When he saw what was going on in our yard, he cursed my grandfather in our language and his own, then brought charges of blasphemy against him. The Holy Church bade my grandfather do penance: he was required to attend all the holy liturgies,

even on minor church holidays, for a certain period of time. So Grandpa picked out the two best saints—George the Victorious and Elijah the Prophet—and said all his prayers to them, for everyone knew that George hated dragons and noblemen, and Elijah killed devils with arrows of thunder and melted their fur and flesh into pitch.

Still singing, I burst into the yard of Uncle Mikola. He was standing near a shed with his legs spread wide, chopping wood. Uncle Mikola was a small red-haired man with a snub nose and enormous moustaches like a general, which hid a perpetual smile. Though he was a poor man, he led a merry life: he never lost heart but boasted so outrageously it made other people laugh and forget their troubles.

As he sowed his small plot of land with rye, he was already thinking ahead to the harvest:

"I'll have eight stooks of grain per acre, and when it's all threshed out, there'll be all of seven tons—I won't have enough room to store it all. Maybe I should start thinking about building a new barn now before it's too late."

However, his harvest was very poor, but he didn't lose heart. When he gathered in the grain, he said with a twinkle in his eye:

"You can't blame me if the weather refuses to listen to the Almighty Himself, much less little old me. This bad harvest is the fault of the weather and none else! But look how fine the chaff is: you can eat it yourself or pickle it and feed it to the priest's wife! If I had a cow, I'd feed her nothing but this chaff, and she'd give cream instead of milk."

"Maybe you'd get butter straight off," nagged Auntie Lukerya who was not too pleased by her husband's boasting.

"That will never happen, my dear wife, for butter could not flow through the cow's teats," specified Uncle Mikola.

"You old coot, you!" she exclaimed, a smile banishing the last traces of displeasure from her yellowish, wrinkled face.

Even during the terrible famine of 1933, Uncle Mikola joked about his misfortunes. I met him in the spring when his frame was emaciated from hunger. He spoke of human misery and recalled neighbors who had passed away before their time. He expressed great pity for them, but said of himself:

"So what if Lukerya and I didn't have any bread. We had so much meat we could have eaten ourselves sick on it. I couldn't keep count of all the livestock running around in my yard." Though there were dark circles of hunger under his eyes, the twinkle of joy at the mere fact of living had not been extinguished. So his eyes filled with laughter and mine with tears...

I don't know why, but it was said in our village that Uncle Mikola had found the beautiful feather of the Firebird.

Just then, Uncle Mikola was energetically splitting birch and hornbeam stumps. He raised the axe above his head, cried "Gekh!", let fall the blade, and the wood was suddenly split in two. He repeated this procedure, crying "Gekh!" loudly each time, and again the split logs thudded to the ground. His large, loose coat with big gathers at the waist was swaying in tact with the blows.

I listened to his "gekhing" and then burst out laughing.

"What's wrong with you, little helper? Did someone tickle your funnybone?" Uncle Mikola asked in surprise.

"Why do you 'gekh' every time you split a log?"

"What?" he asked, grinning through his moustache. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know why?"

"No."

"Well, you must be in a bad way, then."

"Not so bad, really. So why do you do it?"

"Because without the 'gekh', the wood won't split."

"Really?"

"If you don't believe me, try it for yourself. Come over here and give it a try right now!"

So I stood where Uncle Mikola had been standing, picked up the axe, raised it above my head, struck, and sure enough, the blade stuck in the wood.

"What did I tell you?" chuckled snub-nosed Uncle Mikola. "Now maybe you'll believe that 'gekhing' is the most important part of chopping wood. All the woodcutters I know swear by it!"

"Tell me, Uncle, is it true that you found a Firebird feather?" I blurted out suddenly.

"Curiosity killed the cat!" Uncle Mikola replied, his whole expression radiating secrecy and mystery.

After such a reply, anyone would realize that Uncle Mikola really had found a Firebird feather but just didn't want to talk about it. Again the charms of a fairy tale filled my mind, and I glanced around the garden and into the street to make sure no one else had heard and to prove that I was a trustworthy accomplice. Then I repeated my question, quietly and conspiratorially:

"Tell me, Uncle, is it really true that you found the feather?"

"Yes, of course," he replied in a whisper, conspiratorially placing his finger to his lips and peering out at the street to see if anyone was about. Luckily for me, there wasn't a soul except the sooty sparrows that slept in the chimney.

"What did you do with it?" I couldn't help asking.

"When everyone in the house was asleep, I made boots for people by the light of the feather."

"You made boots?" I repeated in disappointment, the magical vision of the fairy tale receding.

"What was I supposed to do when there wasn't any other light?" he said, his moustaches twitching with mirth on his reddened face.

That being the case, I began to giggle as well and shook my head in reproach so Uncle Mikola wouldn't think I had believed him just like that. But still, it was too bad the magic bubble of the lovely old tale had burst...

Soon the two of us were headed for my house, and Uncle Mikola was telling me a fascinating yarn of what a fine horse he was going to buy: no one in the village—no one in all the district—would have one to match it in beauty or strength. He would have bought it long ago just to spite those who thought he had no money. He told me he would buy the horse as soon as he found one the right color. What the neighbors said about the money was sheer foolishness. But still, Uncle Mikola didn't consider himself a poor man. Even when his property was written down in the registry of the village Soviet, he had tried to prove that he should not be written down as a poor peasant, but as a peasant of middle means.

But Uncle Sebastian laughed and asked: "And what those means consist of, your wife and children, for God's sake?!"

"Just look at all I've got, Sebastian!" Uncle Mikola retorted indignantly and started to count, first on one hand, then the other: "I've got a fine house, and the house even has a pantry. I've got a barn out in the yard, and a shed, too. I've got a mortar and a hand-mill, and a goose and chickens—you should see what a marvelous rooster I've got, man. I get more eggs from my hens than anyone else in the village. And I'm a cobbler as well."

"If I'd known you had so much property, I would've put you down as a rich man!" exclaimed Uncle Sebastian, dancing with merriment.

When we reached the house, Uncle Mikola took his spectacles from his pocket and balanced them on the very end of his nose, but he read the letter without looking through the lenses. While he was reading, even his moustache looked serious.

I was very glad my father was alive and well, but what he wrote made me want to burst out laughing, because he said the same thing in every letter: *"Be sure to give my fondest regards to my dear relation Gnat, Danila's son, who married Petro Mikitov's daughter Olyana. May he lead an easy life and may he always have plenty to eat."*

I could just imagine Uncle Gnat, Danila's son, who was a very tall man, sitting at his kitchen table stuffing down bread. The mere thought of it was extremely funny to me. But how could I laugh when Papa's greetings brought tears to my mother's eyes, while my grandparents shook their heads with deep

emotion and noted who else Father would send his fondest regards to in his letter. So I sighed and pursed my lips, nodding my head along with the rest. I nodded more quickly than they did and noted that my zeal had aroused their suspicions. So to avoid any possible reproaches, I began to listen attentively to the continued list of warmest greetings. Finally, we reached the end of the letter, and Mother wiped her eyes with the corner of her kerchief and asked our kind reader if he were keeping the Lenten fast.

"I'll be glad to keep the fast if you have some of the smoked sturgeon or lovely pink salmon the rich men eat," Uncle Mikola replied solemnly.

At this, everybody laughed, Mother headed for the stove to find something to feed our guest. I decided to take advantage of the moment, so I ran over to her and gazed into her kindly face with longing in my eyes.

"What do you want, Mikhailo?" Mama asked softly and tenderly, stroking my head with her hand.

"Nothing, Mama," I said with a trembling voice. "I just wish Pa would come home soon."

"Do you miss him?"

"More than anything. Do you think he'll bring me some boots when he comes home?"

"Probably not, son. He'll be lucky if he brings himself home in one piece," she replied, glancing out the window with a worried look on her face.

"What could happen to him?"

"These are troubled times, son. Anything might happen. Now tell me what you want."

"Can I go out to play?"

"Do you want to play in the yard?"

"Anywhere," I replied vaguely because I was hoping to run off to the forest. But it was better not to breathe a word about it, since I would immediately be forbidden to go anywhere near it: there were reputedly armed bandits in the forest.

"What in the world am I going to do with you?" she said, and her face brightened a bit—not a bad sign at all. "What am I going to do with you, you little rough-houser?"

"Let me go out to play. That's all you have to do."

"Let you go out, you say?" she asked, shaking her head reproachfully.

"Please say I can go!" I pleaded gleefully, throwing my arms around her and gazing imploringly up at her.

I could tell she liked that, for she looked hard at me and said I was lop-eared, a conclusion with which I fully agreed. Then she fastened the top button on my shirt, waved me off, and said sternly:

"Go since you're so set on it, but mind you, don't ruin my last pair of boots. Don't go dragging them through the mud, and stay out of the puddles and ditches. Don't tease the dogs or get into any fights..."

"O. K., Mama!" I agreed eagerly heading for the door. As soon as I was outside, I immediately forgot everything I had been forbidden to do, since I was free as a bird until evening.

As I whizzed outside like a bullet, from the neighbors' yard came the sound of sly clucking. It could only have been Petro Shevchik. That loud clucking signified all manner of chicanery. Although we were the same age, he thought he had the right to boss me around, because the previous summer, he had taken three cows to pasture every day, and I had just hung around while my grandfather did his carpentry, taking our pitiful old mare, bald with age, to pasture whenever the need arose. Her antics had often made me the butt of the other shepherds' jokes. First of all, if you didn't give her a treat, she wouldn't let you mount, and then, she would never gallop. If you tried to make her, she would nip your leg but good. So I always came in last whenever we raced one another. I would eat the dust of the others and dream of the day I would fly like the wind on a real stallion...

Petro gazed down on me from the other side of the wattle fence—a trick he had learned from the older shepherds—and started clucking again.

I realized which way the wind was blowing, but I decided to play dumb and asked with feigned innocence and sympathy:

"Why are you making those strange sounds? Maybe you should see a doctor?"

"It's all right. It happened when I saw you," replied Petro with a sly grin, then took note of my boots: "Are they your mother's?"

"They used to be, but now they're mine."

"Really?"

"Yes, she bought herself some new ones and gave these to me."

"I don't believe you," he said, but his puzzled scowl revealed that he didn't know whether I was telling the truth or not.

"You can go and ask her if you'd like. There's my house right there," I replied and gave a careless wave in the direction of the side wall.

"Well, I guess you got lucky, didn't you?" Petro said enviously, although there was no reason for envy, since he had a real pair of boots made to order; just his size they were.

"Petro, let's go to the forest."

"Why should we go all that way? We've already seen everything there," he complained, looking at me with doubt in his eyes.

"What do you mean, 'everything'?" I said, gazing at the bluish oak grove

in the distance. It seemed to be bathing in the waters of spring. "We'll just go look at the forest, that's all."

"There's nothing so great about it. I've been going to the forest since I was knee-high to a grasshopper, and I don't see anything so special about it."

"Well, you don't have to go if you don't want to. No one's making you," I retorted, getting ready to run off.

"Wait a minute!" he cried and clambered over the fence. He stood in front of me and ordered imperiously: "Follow me!"

"It's a good thing you're going first," I said innocently.

"Why is that? Petro asked doubtfully, looking back over his shoulder.

"Because my boots will be drier."

"What a smarty-pants you are!" he said with a scowl. "First I'll lead the way, and then you'll get your turn!"

We walked along the highway lined with linden trees until we reached a glen with merry brooks gurgling through it. They sang as they rushed to the ponds they fed and the water-meadows and Bear Valley through which a small river meandered. The river was still frozen, but the brooks were already gurgling and shilly-shallying against the ice. We began to dance on the ice in time with the tinkling of the brooks, and all traces of leadership disappeared from Petro's flushed face. He really outdid himself with his imitations of Uncle Mikola dancing, then of Auntie Nastya and Uncle Yermolai, who would do little tap-dances when he was tipsy and shout: "Oh-oh-oh! Oh-oh-oh!" Our boots were soaking wet, while our pants and even our jackets were drenched with the icy water.

Somewhere nearby, the ice cracked.

"Did you hear that?" Petro asked mysteriously, lowering his head to listen.

"Sure."

"Do you know what it was?"

"No."

"It was a pike breaking the ice with its tail."

"How can a pike have such a strong tail?"

"Pikes have tails strong as iron! It wasn't even trying hard just then. Sometimes the blow will be so hard, it'll make a hole smack in the middle of the river, and an enormous tail will appear from the water. If a fisherman is lucky enough, he can grab the pike by the tail and toss it onto the bank."

We listened to the river and heard the ice cracking somewhere beyond the willows. It was another pike, but it must not have struck the frozen surface very hard, because no hole appeared in the ice.

Drenching wet but in high spirits, we finally reached the forest. From the treetops and below came all sorts of noises. Obviously, it was the spirit of the

forest chattering merrily away in expectation of spring. Although I loved the forest, I was a bit afraid of its spirit: if I angered it, it would lead me into the wildest of thickets where no human foot had trod or tree known the bite of an axe, and abandon me there.

I loved the cottage that appeared unexpectedly in the forest with its creaking gates and neat little paths running to orchard and apiary. I liked to watch birch sap dripping down spouts and into buckets with a cheery "plop, plop, plop": the sound would inevitably draw me to the tree, so I would squat in front of it and watch for a while. I enjoyed coming upon a forest spring and watching the crystal clear water whirl up from the depths. I loved the sight of mushrooms embracing like long-lost brothers with tiny dewdrops on their caps. I could walk through the forest for hours in autumn, up to my knees in fallen leaves that rustled comfortingly with every step, gazing at the guelder rose red clusters of berries and revelling in the pungent aroma of mushrooms.

I threw both arms around a birch tree and pressed my ear to the trunk, but it was still silent, because the sap still had not risen under the bark: the forest had not yet come to life. A jay was squawking at the top of the birch tree, its wings gleaming like mirrors, and Petro asked:

"Do you know why jay birds don't fly south for the winter?"

"No."

"Because all jays have a screw missing: they fly south all day, then they want to know how far they've flown, so they fly back that night to find out."

"Hm," I mumbled in surprise and listened to the song which the jay had brazenly stolen from some poor little birdie. The jay is a cunning bird: it feeds on its smaller, weaker brothers, then steals their songs to amuse itself.

"Look! There's a hare!" shouted Petro and dashed off into the ravine.

Sure enough, there between the trees was a scraggly hare, grown thin with the long winter, who didn't seem to be very frightened of us at all. It paused to look for a moment, then disappeared into the forest.

"If only I had a gun!" exclaimed Petro regretfully.

I wasn't sorry at all, because I hated it when hunters returned from the forest with bloody game dangling from their belts. That poor hare had never hurt a soul, and surely it deserved a better fate than a bullet through the head!

I bent over a little hollow in the porous snow where a tiny collar of green surrounded a young spindle tree. Something the size of my pinky was trying to push through to the surface, so I brushed away the snow and saw a fragile snowdrop which had not yet raised its little head. That was what had warmed the snow enough to make a hole as it strived toward the sun. So the forest had come to life after all, because the swans had brought new life and spring on their silvery wings.

BERDY KERBABAYEV

(1894-1974)

Soviet Turkmen writer Berdy Kerbabayev was born into a peasant family in the village of Kouki-Zereng, now in Tejen Region. Before the Revolution, he studied at the village school and at a Bukhara madrasah. After the Revolution of 1917, he entered the Leningrad Institute of Oriental Studies. His satirical verses on the issues of the day were first published in 1923, marking the beginning of his literary career. Many of his works had a significant effect on the development of Turkmen literature, among them the poems *World of a Maiden* (1927), *Moving Towards the New Life* (1928), and *The Amu Darya* (1931); the first Turkmen book of essays and short stories, *Reality* (1931); the novellas *Bairam* (1934), *Batyr* (1935), and others. These writings condemn and criticize the remnants of the feudal past, support the emancipation of the Turkmen women, and appeal to the Turkmens to embrace a new way of life and take an active part in the creation of socialist relations among men. During World War II, Kerbabayev published the novella *Kurban Durdy* (1942) and the poem *Ailar* (1943). He also wrote the libretto for the first Turkmen opera on a contemporary theme, *Abadan* (1943). The novel *Nebitdag* (1957) about the life of Turkmen oil workers was an important contribution to Turkmen literature.

Kerbabayev wrote a number of works for children including the books of short stories *At the Border* (1955) and *Batyr* (1957). The novella *The Merry Japbaks* (1967) about four brave but mischievous brothers is based on local folklore. Kerbabayev introduced Turkmen readers to classics of Russian and Soviet literature: he translated into Turkmen such works as *Hadji Murat* and *Anna Karenina*, by Lev Tolstoy; *Wit Works Woe*, by Alexander Griboyedov; Gorky's *Mother; Virgin Soil Upturned*, by Mikhail Sholokhov; many of Alexander Pushkin's poems and Ivan Krylov's fables; the verse of the Tatar poet Musa Djalil and many others.

The novel, *A Drop of Water, a Nugget of Gold*, was the last major work by Kerbabayev, one of the founders of Soviet Turkmen literature.

Berdy Kerbabayev The Merry Japbaks

THE MERRY JAPBAKS*

WHO ARE THE JAPBAKS?

Once upon a time in the village of Durun there lived four brothers. The eldest was called Japbak, and next came Yapbak, then Mapbak, and the youngest of all was Topbak. All four were short and stocky, with heads round as melons: it was very hard to tell them apart if you didn't know them well. And it happened quite often that Japbak got called Yapbak, while Mapbak and Topbak were confused as well.

The old Turkmen women marvelled at this phenomenon:

"Those four little brigands are alike as four peas in a pod! You can't tell them apart! Just try to figure out which one is which!"

But you could tell them apart if you had to, for they weren't really that much alike. For example, Japbak had a hooked nose and a broad, flat forehead, and his eyes sparkled merrily. Yapbak, on the other hand, had a prominent forehead and thick lips, but his eyes sparkled merrily, too. Mapbak had a round face, rosy cheeks, and the same sparkling eyes. The youngest brother, Topbak, was snub-nosed, and his round head was perched firmly atop his short neck. And his eyes sparkled just as merrily as those of his brothers.

It was the way their eyes sparkled that made people confuse the Japbaks. People said that even their own mother, Bolluk, mixed them up on occasion. If Mapbak fell down and smashed his nose, she would pick him up, kiss him, and say: "My poor little Topbak, what in the world have you done now?.." Or she would bump into Japbak, who was always underfoot, and scold: "Stay out of my way, Yapbak, or you'll find yourself in more trouble than you know what to do with!.."

Their father had died when the boys were still small, so they lived alone with their mother, and a hard life it was: not only did the neighboring khans and padishahs attack Turkmenistan, ravaging and plundering as they went, but the people also had to contend with their own *bais* and mullahs who fleeced the poor mercilessly. And the Japbaks' family was a poor one indeed. Bolluk said their father had died from poverty and hard work. She had to work day and night to feed the boys who were growing up like thistle in the steppe without a father's care or mother's supervision.

But then, they were the best of friends and thick as thieves. They did everything together: they ate meals together, played together, and even went to bed

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at the same time. They always stood up for each other and stuck together: whatever one said, the other three would stand by. They never left each other's sight. But since Japbak was the eldest, after all, the four of them were known throughout the village as the Japbaks.

Everybody in Durun loved them, and even the poorest of the villagers would share his last crust of bread with the boys. The Japbaks were past masters at thinking up all sorts of amusing pastimes. Peals of laughter were often heard near the Japbaks' tent, and a mop-headed listener would be slapping his knees in delight:

"What a fine bunch those Japbaks are!"

Only the rich *bais'* sons avoided those noisy crowds, for they did not associate with poor people.

...Many centuries have passed since then, and those once-mighty *bais* and mullahs and merchants are long forgotten, but even today, the Turkmen people remember the merry Japbaks and their mischievous pranks and jokes.

Read on and you will learn about a few of their adventures.

HOW JAPBAK SPAT ON HIS HANDS

This happened in spring before the sun was very hot, when the earth had only just turned green and birdsong filled the steppe. The weather was much too fine to just sit home, so the brothers decided to set out on a hunting trip.

Japbak suggested that they set snares for pheasants; Mapbak wanted to go hunting hazel-grouse; and Yapbak suggested that they put out lots of clever traps to catch hares.

"Let's go looking for birds' eggs instead!" said Topbak, the youngest.

They all imagined an enormous plate of tasty, piping hot fried eggs, and their mouths began to water. But they couldn't decide what to use to gather the eggs.

"We can put them in my shirt!" Japbak offered generously.

"But it's all full of holes!" objected Yapbak. "We'd be better off using mine."

"That's not a shirt, it's a tent frame," laughed Mapbak. "You can stick a fist through it at any point. Let's use my shirt!"

"We won't get anywhere trying to use our shirts," said Yapbak with a wave of his hand. "Only the back of yours is in one piece, and mine is nothing but a collar with threads hanging from it. We'd be better off putting the eggs in an old wineskin."

At first, they all liked the idea, but then Japbak objected:

"Wait a minute! That wineskin burst ages ago. It won't even hold water."

"But we're going to put eggs in it, not water," explained Mapbak.

"Hey, wait!" interrupted Yapbak. "We can put the eggs in Mama's gourd. It can hold water or milk just fine."

"That's a good idea," agreed Topbak. "And we can put the gourd inside the wineskin."

They decided to carry the wineskin by turns, two at a time, holding it by the two corners. Japbak and Yapbak took the first turn, and all was going well until they came to a bush which Japbak decided to circumvent from the right. Naturally, Yapbak wanted to go to the left. The wineskin with the gourd got caught on the prickly bush. The brothers pulled it in opposite directions, but it was stuck fast.

"Stop it, or you'll tear it in two!" Mapbak and Topbak tried to convince them.

"I'm not going to budge an inch!" shouted Japbak.

"And neither am I!" Yapbak hissed through his teeth.

They argued and argued and finally decided that the weaker would have to give way... So they began to pull, each at his end. Mapbak grabbed Yapbak by the belt and Topbak took hold of Japbak's shoulders. They tugged as hard as they could, but neither side could gain the upper hand. So they straightened up for a moment, caught their breath, wiped the sweat from their brows, and gave a mighty tug! The strings snapped, and the Japbaks fell on each other. The wineskin and gourd went flying. They struck a stump and the gourd was smashed to smithereens.

The brothers got up moaning and rubbing their bruises. They were about to fly at one another once more, but when they saw their sweat- and dust-covered faces, they burst out laughing. Suddenly Topbak fell silent and frowned.

"What's the matter?" asked Mapbak. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"My head hurts from the thought that just popped into it."

Yapbak and Mapbak giggled, for they found it extremely amusing that Topbak could have any kind of thought at all.

But Japbak shouted at them:

"Be quiet and listen! Now tell us what kind of a thought you've had, Topbak."

"I was thinking that we'd just broken the gourd, and that if Mama were to buy a cow, she wouldn't have anything to milk it into."

Japbak thumped his mirthful brothers' foreheads:

"Why were you laughing like idiots? He's got a point."

"Sure he does," said Yapbak, waving his hand in dismissal, "but by the time

the Japbaks get a cow, hundreds of new gourds will ripen and be made into dippers and jugs. They will get broken, too, and the next crop will ripen!"

"That's also quite true," remarked Japbak, scratching the back of his head.

In the thorn bushes, the boys found only a few miniscule birds' eggs.

"That's too bad," sighed Japbak. "This isn't enough to make a good omelette. Why don't we leave them and let them hatch."

By midday, the Japbaks' lips were green from the juice of wild onions, and the wineskin was full of mushrooms. They were quite vexed that they hadn't thought of bringing a flint and tinder with them.

"Just think, right now we could be building a campfire to fry our mushrooms," said Yapbak wistfully. "And wouldn't that be a treat! But now we have to go home hungry!"

So the Japbaks set off for home. But on the way, they came across a dried-up well, of which there are many in the steppe. Mapbak leaned over the top and shouted:

"O-o-o-o!"

And the well answered back with a dull echo: "O-o-o-o!" In the wake of the echo, a couple of jays flew out of the cool depths of the well. The boys could make out a nest in a depression of the wall. They tried to pry it loose with a stick and pull it to the top, but the nest fell, and the pitiful crying of the baby birds could be heard from the very bottom of the well. The Japbaks felt sorry for the little fledglings.

"We have to put the nest back," said Japbak, "or the baby birds will die."

But how to get down to the bottom of the well? Japbak took hold of a stump that was standing next to the well, and swang his legs over the side. Yapbak grabbed hold of his feet, Mapbak grabbed hold of Yapbak's, and Topbak took hold of Mapbak's, but still little Topbak's toes didn't touch bottom!

Now they were really in a predicament, hanging there in mid-air, and they had to find a way out before they could do anything to help the baby birds!

"Oh, my hands are getting numb!" moaned Topbak from the depths of the well. "Pull me up, Mapbak!"

But Mapbak's hands were numb, too.

"Yapbak, pull us up!" he cried.

But Yapbak couldn't do anything either, with Mapbak hanging on to his feet, while he was holding on to Japbak's for dear life.

"Let go of my feet!" shouted Japbak in anger. "You're holding on so tight I can't even breathe!"

"We can't!" his brothers cried from inside the well. "If we let go of you, we'll all fall!"

"O. K., then, I'll pull you out," Japbak acquiesced. "But first I have to spit on my hands..."

So he let go of the stump to spit on his hands and they all went tumbling to the bottom of the well, falling one on top of the other. Topbak, who was on the very bottom, got stuck up to his knees in the dry sand. The Japbaks floundered about at the bottom of the well for a long time. Finally, they grabbed Topbak by the arms and pulled him out of the sand. Then they all sat down on the cool ground and didn't even notice the poor little birds they had been determined to save.

"Why did you do such a stupid thing?" Topbak reproached Japbak. "It's because of you that we're all in this mess now!"

"It's not as if I pushed you all in and stayed at the top myself..." retorted Japbak, shrugging his shoulders. "I never thought my own brothers would pull me down by the feet and make me fall into a well!"

There was no mistaking it—the Japbaks were really in a pickle this time. No matter how much they shouted for help, no one answered.

And that was strange, because there were a lot of kids out picking mushrooms and looking for birds' eggs in the steppe, just like the Japbaks. Finally, when someone did turn up, it was just their luck that it turned out to be four of the rich *bais'* sons who had noticed a pair of jays flying above one and the same place in fright and alarm.

The *bais'* sons were old enemies of the Japbaks.

One of them was fat and conceited: all he could do was show off the fine red Moroccan leather boots his father, Kelek-bai, had bought him. Another was the sole heir to the fortune of Allan the money-lender; he loved to eavesdrop and poor-mouth and couldn't stand the merry Japbaks. The third, a cowardly, jealous chap who was always drooling, was the son of the mullah Yalak-ishan. But the thin-lipped, hunchbacked son of Kolak the merchant, a malicious, beady-eyed lad who pranced about the village in his new red robe, hated the Japbaks most of all. These boys were so obnoxious no one would call them by name: instead, they were all given nicknames: Fatso, Sneak, Drooler, and Humpback.

These four had walked over to the well because they were convinced the jays were being frightened away by an eagle-owl. But when they looked down, what should they see but the four Japbaks floundering about.

Fatso, Sneak, Drooler and Humpback were overjoyed! They shouted down to the brothers:

"So you've finally gotten what you deserve, you bunch of smarty-pants! How do you like it down there in the well? Hey, Japbak, catch this! Take that, Mapbak!" they cried out and began to throw lumps of dried clay at the brothers.

Japbak shook his fist at the *bais'* sons, and Yapbak and Mapbak were about to start yelling at them, but Topbak whispered to them:

"Be quiet, I've thought of something!" And he began repeating in a stage whisper: "There they are, brothers. Look how pretty they are! And just think, they're all ours—all ours and no one else's!"

Sneak leaned over the well in curiosity and asked:

"What is it? What have you got?"

"A golden bird, that's what!" Topbak retorted proudly, pointing at the jays' nest and sticking his tongue out at them.

"It's just a fledgling and nothing more!" Sneak replied uncertainly.

"Ha! A lot you know! Not everyone is lucky enough to see a golden bird, even if he lives to be a hundred!" Japbak said.

The rich *bais'* sons tried to pretend that they weren't the least bit interested in the golden bird and even walked away from the well, but not for long! They were dying to get their hands on that bird! In their fathers' tents, they heard talk only of gold, silver, and money, so how could they miss their one and only chance to get a golden bird. So Fatso exchanged glances with Sneak, who whis-

pered with Humpback, then asked the Japbaks:

"Will you share it with us if we pull you out of the well?"

"I guess we don't have any choice, do we?" Japbak agreed reluctantly.

"We'll get the bird, and each of you will get a feather," announced Humpback.

The brothers whispered among themselves for appearances' sake, then answered:

"O. K., we'll give you the bird, but you have to stick to our agreement: you can't breathe a word to anyone about where you got it. If you even so much as hint about it to your fathers, they'll take it from you, and you'll never see a feather of your golden bird."

So the *bais'* sons hurriedly swore not to say a word, then took off their belts, tied them together, and began to pull the Japbaks out of the well one by one.

"Topbak has the bird," the brothers said.

Finally Topbak climbed out of the well, having managed to shove the nest back into the hollow in the wall on his way.

"Well, where's the golden bird?" asked the *bais'* sons, trembling with greed.

Topbak balled up his fist and shoved it right under Fatso's nose, then spat out:

"Here it is! How do you like it?"

Japbak thumped Drooler on the forehead and said tenderly:

"Don't worry, the golden bird still hasn't finished turning into gold. There's still a lot of dross in it. So let it stay there and turn into pure gold."

"And after it has turned into gold, will you give it to us like you promised?" asked Drooler. His eyes were burning, and even more spit than usual was dribbling from his mouth.

"Sure, we made an agreement, didn't we? Only you have to keep your side of the bargain: not a word to anyone, or you'll never see the bird!"

And the Japbaks set off for home singing a merry song they made up on the spot:

Drooler, keep hold of your bird of gold!
Don't lose a feather, for I've been told,
That if the bird should fly away,
Your father will make you rue the day!

THE GOOD SPIRIT

Once the Japbaks were passing Doiduk-eje's two tents. They had just walked by the festive white tent when they heard a strange sound coming from the black cooking tent. "Hr-r-r," it went.

The brothers exchanged glances.

"Maybe it's a dog," Japbak suggested.

"No, dogs don't sound like that," replied Yapbak, scratching the crown of his head. "Maybe the old woman is sharpening her knife."

But Mapbak shook his head and objected:

"No, it's not that kind of sound at all. Maybe it's Doiduk-eje snoring."

"She wouldn't have had time to fall asleep! We just saw her walking into the tent!" Topbak said with a laugh. "What if there's an evil spirit inside? Let's go have a look, what do you say?"

The Japbaks were never satisfied until they had found out what they wanted to. So they set off for the black tent.

Fat old Doiduk guessed immediately why the Japbaks had come, so she motioned for her servant to continue grinding.

The Japbaks had never seen a hand-mill in all their lives. The round, grayish millstone revolved and creaked: "Gr-r-r..." The brothers stepped back in surprise.

"Well, what are you afraid of?" asked Doiduk with a laugh.

"What in the world is that, Doiduk-eje?" asked Yapbak.

Doiduk had an old grudge against the Japbaks, for she believed they had stolen her favorite hen. True, no one had seen the brothers with the hen, and it had probably been dragged off by a jackal one night, but Doiduk-eje didn't like the boys and was always looking for a chance to do them a bad turn.

"It's called the good spirit," she said.

"And what's a good spirit?" asked Mapbak in disbelief.

"Whoever prays to the good spirit will grow rich."

"Did you get rich from praying to it?" asked Topbak.

"Of course! I say my prayers before it every day."

Japbak thought a bit and asked:

"Can anyone get rich that way?"

"Of course, but I won't let just anyone come near my good spirit. But since you don't have a father and your poor mother has to work so hard, I'll let you if you want. Go on over there, and maybe a couple of sheep will appear outside your tent! Go on, don't be afraid!"

The brothers exchanged glances and decided there was no harm in trying. So they got ready to say their prayers.

But when Japbak knelt down in front of the hand-mill, the rotating millstone struck him on the forehead. The same thing happened when the other brothers tried to pray to the good spirit.

"Well, have you said your prayers, then?" chortled Doiduk. "You should consider yourselves fortunate and count your blessings!"

But instead of counting his blessings, Japbak grabbed the beetle and began to pound the hand-mill.

"This is no good spirit!" he shouted. "It's an evil spirit if there ever was one!"

The millstone cracked; the handle flew off in one direction and the axis in another.

"Beat the evil spirit! Beat the forces of darkness!" shouted the Japbaks as they destroyed the hand-mill.

A minute later, there was nothing left but broken pieces. Doiduk ran from one brother to the other, trying to stay their hands.

"You worthless scamps!" shouted the fat old woman. "The devil take you! You've brought an end to all my riches!.."

"Don't be upset," Japbak comforted her. "We've just broken it into pieces and sown them in your tent. When they all start to grow, think how rich you'll be!"

Doiduk fell silent and gnashed her teeth, and the Japbaks politely said goodbye to their hostess and left. As they walked along, they whistled and sang a merry song:

We just helped poor old Doiduk-eje
Throw out an evil spirit and gave our pledge
That if it should come back again,
We'll beat it once more, for we're bound to win.

HOW THE JAPBAKS ROASTED SHISH KEBABS

In the sooty old tent sat a woman. Her kind face was covered with wrinkles. It was hard to tell what kind of cloth her dress was made of, it was so covered with patches. Resting her chin on her hand and her elbows on her knees, she sat there, staring at some point in space.

It was Bolluk, the Japbaks' mother.

She was wondering and wondering what to feed the boys. There was nothing at all to eat. Once they had had a tiny plot of land, but Yalak-ishan had taken it away after her husband had died, and Kelek-bai had taken their well. Their skinny old cow had been taken away by Doiduk, and she had nothing else in the whole wide world but four hungry boys.

Topbak ran into the tent, interrupting his mother's dour thoughts.

"Look what I've got, Mother!"

His mother's tearful eyes did not make out at once what it was that the boy had in his hand.

"What have you got?"

Topbak held out a little gray bird:

"It's a hazel-grouse, Mama, a nice little hazel-grouse."

"Where did you get it?"

"We caught it in one of our snares. We made them out of horsehair."

The Japbaks ran in one after another, each holding a grayish bird.

So they began to discuss how to cook the birds. Japbak suggested that they make rice pilaff. No one objected, for they all loved hot, tasty rice pilaff!

But Bolluk, who knew that there wasn't a grain of rice in her home, said firmly:

"No children, hot rice pilaff won't taste good in this sweltering weather."

And they all agreed with her at once.

When Yapbak suggested that they fry their catch, they all supported him: they could already smell the wonderful aroma of frying game.

But Bolluk knew that there wasn't a drop of oil in the tent, so she said with a smile:

"You know that the fat of small birds is sticky. It would glue your beards and whiskers together..."

The Japbaks stroked their smooth, fresh cheeks and laughed.

"We should make sauce with these birds!" exclaimed Mapbak.

But Bolluk knew that you had to have flour to make sauce, so she objected this time as well:

"Sauce will give you the hiccups! We'd better make something else."

So they started to think, and finally Topbak jumped up and said:

"I know! Let's make shish kebabs!"

Bolluk-eje had nothing against this suggestion, so the Japbaks went outside, plucked the birds, and put them on the skewers.

Just then a beggar came riding up. He was not really like a beggar at all—all speckled and mottled. His sated little horse was skewbald. His robe was all different colors, and his full red beard was streaked with gray. Even his sly, beady eyes were different colors: one was gray with flecks of blue, and the other was brown with dark spots. His face was smooth and rosy-cheeked.

From afar, he began to stroke his sleek beard and whine:

"Give a poor beggar a little something to eat!.. Allah will grant all your wishes for your kindness."

Japbak hid his skewer behind his back and asked the well-fed beggar point-blank:

"Then what about Kelek-bai? He never gives a morsel to anyone, and Allah seems to treat him quite well."

The other Japbaks chimed in:

"That's true. Why is it that Kelek-bai never gives anything to the poor, and he lives better than anyone else in the village?"

The mottled beggar held out his hand as before, and continued his chant, not answering their question:

"Allah will multiply your blessings..."

Mapbak gestured to the pitiful furnishings of their tent and sighed:

"It's about time He multiplied them... Can't He see what sorry shape we're in down here? And what are you doing begging for a living? If you asked Allah, I'm sure he'd multiply your blessings. You might even become a rich man... Although I can see you're not doing too badly for yourself as it is."

"I don't need a lot, my little camels. A morsel here, a bite there, and I'm full by evening, and so is my horse..."

The beggar had already untied his sack, at the bottom of which the boys could see a little bit of flour.

"It seems you've stuck to us like glue, and we won't get rid of you until we give you something!" With these words, Japbak poured a cup of wheat into the sack. His mother had gathered the wheat grain by grain after the harvest had been taken in.

"That's a good beginning, my little camel..." said the beggar, not taking the sack away. "Now I could use some barley for my poor horse..."

"What a prickly one you are, *ishan*! You've stuck to us like a burr!" grumbled Yapbak and poured a cup of barley, also gathered grain by grain by his mother, into the sack.

But the beggar still didn't leave. He held his sack open before the younger brothers.

Mapbak sighed and dumped a tiny cup of sorghum into the sack.

"Now get out of here. That's all we've got. There's nothing more!"

But the beggar still didn't show any signs of leaving. Lavishing praise upon Mapbak, he held the sack out before Topbak.

"Obviously, there's no way to get rid of you!" sighed Topbak and poured a cup of water into the sack.

The beggar trembled with anger:

"What have you done, you brats! I gathered all this handful by handful, and now, it's only fit to be thrown away!"

"Why should you throw it away? It'll make a fine porridge!"

Japbak silently picked up the sack, scooped out a cupful of the mixture, and handed the sack to his brother. Yapbak also scooped out a cupful, and Mapbak did the same. But Topbak handed the sack back to the beggar without taking anything out. The brothers carefully poured the thin gruel into their pot.

The beggar stared at the Japbaks in amazement and said:

"Obviously, I'll get nothing from you!"

So he jumped on his horse and went his way.

The brothers continued roasting their shish kebabs. When they were ready, the boys called their mother and set about eating.

Topbak gobbled down his share in a flash and began to lick his fingers.

"Tell me, Mama," he asked, "why is it your name means 'abundance' when we don't even have any bread?"

Bolluk looked at them in confusion and shrugged. Then she picked up the leather wineskin and tied a knot in it, saying:

"Take this wineskin, sons..."

"What should we do with it?" asked Topbak in surprise. "Go around begging like that mottled creature that came by just now?"

"Heaven forbid, my little camels! Never go begging, not ever! Go and find a field which has been reaped and gather the ears of wheat that have been left behind. Then we'll have a bit of bread in our tent."

"That's a good idea!" shouted the Japbaks joyfully. "We'll gather a whole wineskin-full, and then we'll have some bread! Hurrah!"

And they began to sing a merry song:

We shall never a-begging go!
We'll tighten our belts! Oh yes, that's so!
And if today we have no dinner,
We'll find something tomorrow and won't get much thinner!

THE LOST WINESKIN

So the Japbaks set off to search for wheat-ears. The boys wandered gloomily from field to field, but they had been picked clean long ago. Other gleaners had obviously visited the fields before them.

The brothers walked and walked until they came upon a field from which the grain had not yet been harvested.

"Wow! Look at that!" shouted Yapbak. "Look at all the wheat!"

"Now our tent will be bursting with bread!" Mapbak shouted joyfully.

"Give me the wineskin!" said Topbak and started to pull off the ears of wheat.

Only Japbak didn't move from the spot. He watched his brothers robbing the field for a few minutes, then shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Stop that at once!"

His brothers turned around and looked at him.

"Are you Japbaks or not?" their elder brother spat out angrily. "What did Mama tell us to do? She said to gather the ears from a field that had already been harvested. And what are you doing?"

The brothers made dour faces, and their hands opened. The ears of wheat fell to the earth.

"You're right!" said Topbak with a sigh.

Japbak shook the ears of wheat his younger brothers had gathered onto the ground. Their eyes watched the ears fall with longing.

"Why is the world so unfair?" they thought. "There's enough wheat here for a million loaves of bread, but we couldn't scrape together a cupful of flour in our whole tent. Why is that?"

Finally Yapbak said:

"Listen, Japbak, after all, you're the eldest. You tell us why we don't have any land of our own."

"Mother told us why: after our father died, Yalak-ishan took our land from us."

Japbak threw the empty wineskin over his shoulder and set off. The brothers reluctantly dragged along after him. And Topbak, who was last of all, glanced back a time or two at the spot where they had left a pile of ripe wheat-ears bursting with grain. It would be hard to go home empty-handed...

Then they came upon a field from which the stooks had not yet been gathered in. Japbak slapped the wineskin against a stook.

"Now here's some grain for you. Gather all you want. This field has already been harvested."

So Yapbak and Mapbak started to pull the stook apart. Only Topbak stood to one side, gloomily chewing on a stem. Suddenly, he said quietly:

"Japbaks, leave that wheat alone!"

Mapbak and Yapbak started yelling at him:

"You can't give us orders! We only listen to our elder brother. Who do you think you are, anyway? You're the youngest of all."

"Mama told us to glean only the ears that have fallen to the ground," Topbak said quietly but firmly. "And you're pulling the stooks apart..."

The brothers stared guiltily at the ground, and Topbak sternly took the wineskin and emptied it. Then they put the stook back together.

After that, all four began gleaning the field energetically. It was much harder work than picking wheat from an unharvested field or taking stooks apart, but the Japbaks' sharp eyes found every single ear dropped by the reapers, and by noon their wineskin was so full, they had nowhere to put any more wheat. So Topbak climbed on top and started dancing to pack the wheat down. They gathered more grain, and it was Mapbak's turn to jump on the skin. They stuffed it even

fuller, and Japbak had his turn. It was so full they could barely tie it shut. When Yapbak punched the side, it rang out merrily.

They drew lots to see who would carry the wineskin first, and Japbak won. But then they had to decide how far each of them would carry the skin. To determine how far they had to go, they decided to count how many steps it was back to their tent and then divide the total by four. So they left the wineskin bursting with grain by the irrigation ditch and set off. But when they got back, it was nowhere to be found! They looked everywhere, but they didn't see hide nor hair of it. They even looked inside the stooks, but it wasn't there; it was as if the earth had swallowed the wineskin whole!

"Hey, wineskin, come on out! Where are you hiding?" shouted Yapbak.

"Mother is probably waiting for us at home to bring her a sackful of grain. How can we go home empty-handed?" Japbak asked gloomily.

"Did we work in vain then?" asked Mapbak. He was on the verge of bursting into tears.

So they searched the whole field again, but they couldn't find the wineskin anywhere. Suddenly they caught sight of someone sitting in the distance. When they drew closer, they saw that it was Kelek-bai! He was like a wineskin that was bursting at the seams himself, enormously fat, with a rich robe that reached all the way to the ground. The brothers greeted him politely.

Kelek-bai was sitting there chewing a plug of tobacco:

"Where are you headed for, boys? Should I wish you a pleasant trip?"

"As it turns out, the trip we just took hasn't been a very pleasant one at all," the eldest brother answered for them all.

"Why? What's the matter?"

"We lost our wineskin."

"And what kind of a wineskin was it?"

"It was stuffed full, bai-aga," he replied. "And it had two arms reaching up."

"It must have flown away like a big bird..."

"It's not a joking matter, bai-aga. If you've seen it, please tell us, and if not, don't bother us."

Kelek-bai was so incensed, he spat out his tobacco.

"So that's how it is, you wretched paupers! You've decided to do a little thieving. Is that it?"

Yapbak pressed his palm to his chest, looked straight into Kelek-bai's eyes, and said:

"It's sinful for you to say a thing like that, bai-aga. We Japbaks have our pride, you know. We'd sooner go to sleep on an empty stomach than covet that which is not ours. Our own mother would spit in our faces if we ever stole any-

thing. We didn't take any of your wheat. We didn't touch what had been harvested or what had been stooked. We only gleaned the grains which had fallen to the ground, and now we've lost out wineskin..."

"I'm sitting on your accursed wineskin!" shouted Kelek-bai.

"What's that?" the Japbaks squealed joyfully. "Then let us have it!"

"Not on your life! How would you like a taste of this, you little scamps!"

The *bai* wanted to pummel the Japbaks with his huge fists, but he was afraid to get off the wineskin.

No matter how hard the brothers pleaded, he wouldn't give them their wheat-ears. He just grew more and more furious and cursed them foully. Finally, the Japbaks realized that if they could somehow make the *bai* rise from his seat, they could get their wineskin back. So they sang:

This fat pig has plopped his butt
Atop our sack, but you know what?
If he will not give it back,
We'll let him have it, whack, whack, whack!

So they teased the *bai* until he became livid with rage and went after them. They scattered in all directions. When he chased after Topbak, Yapbak pinched him and began to sing his impudent song. Then, when he lit out after Topbak, Mapbak poked his behind and teased him, sticking out his tongue. The *bai* was soon exhausted from the chase. His face turned red and he puffed and panted. He started chasing Japbak, and Yapbak stuck out his foot to trip the old *bai*, who went flying face down into the dust. That was just what the Japbaks had been waiting for. The four of them fell on him and began to shout: "Pile up, pile up, let's make a pile up!" Kelek-bai puffed and kicked underneath them, like a wild boar. Then the brothers began to tickle him, Japbak his armpits, and Yapbak, the soles of his feet. Mapbak tickled his ribs, and Topbak sat on his legs to keep him from kicking. Kelek-bai laughed until he cried from all that tickling.

"Let me go!" screeched the *bai*. "I'm choking to death! You can have your stupid wineskin!"

"Now tell us, who's the thief?" Japbak asked him gently, continuing to tickle his armpits.

"I am!" cried Kelek-bai. "I'm the thief!"

With that, the Japbaks released their victim at once.

"Don't touch him!" said Japbak. "This man has just told the truth for the first time in his life."

"Well, come on and stand up, bai-aga," agreed Yapbak. "A man who tells the truth is worthy of respect."

They gently helped Kelek-bai get up, and brushed off the dust and straws that had stuck to his robe. Kelek-bai was barely alive, and he could hardly speak, but he swore that as long as he lived, he would never say another word against the Japbaks. The boys said good-bye to him politely, bidding him farewell in the manner befitting a respected elder. They picked up their wineskin and set off for home. And the *bai* stood by the road watching them carry the heavy sack, and heard their merry song:

This fat pig has plopped his butt
Atop our sack, but you know what?
If he will not give it back,
We'll let him have it, whack, whack, whack!

AIBEK

(1904-1968)

Aibek (the pen-name of Musa Tashmukhamedov), a Soviet Uzbek writer, was born into the family of a weaver in Tashkent. In 1925, he completed the Tashkent Teachers' Training Courses and became a teacher. In 1930, he graduated from the Leningrad Economics Institute with a degree in economics and continued his studies at the Central Asian State University in Tashkent.

Aibek began his literary career as a poet in 1922. His first collection of verse, *Emotions* (1926), was devoted to life in Soviet Uzbekistan. His subsequent works dealt with modern themes and called for active struggle against the old world; they included the collection of verse *Torch* (1932), and the poems *Vendetta* (1932) and *Djure the Blacksmith* (1933). The poem *Navoi* (1937) deals with the life of the famous 15th-century Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi. Aibek's first novel, *Sacred Blood* (1943), describes life in Uzbekistan during the World War I and the involvement of the poorest and most oppressed peasants in the national liberation movement of 1916. This is one of the most outstanding works of socialist realism in Uzbek literature. The publication of Aibek's novel *Navoi* (1945), which portrays the inner world and great humanism of the poet with historical accuracy, was another major event for Uzbek culture. During World War II, Aibek wrote a number of patriotic verses, including "To All Men", "Victory Is Ours", and "My Homeland". The poem *Khamza* (1948) was devoted to the life and activities of one of the founders of Soviet Uzbek literature, Khamza Khakim zade Niyazi. In the post-war years, Aibek penned the novel, *The Shore of the Golden Valley* (1950); it describes the lives of Uzbek farmers.

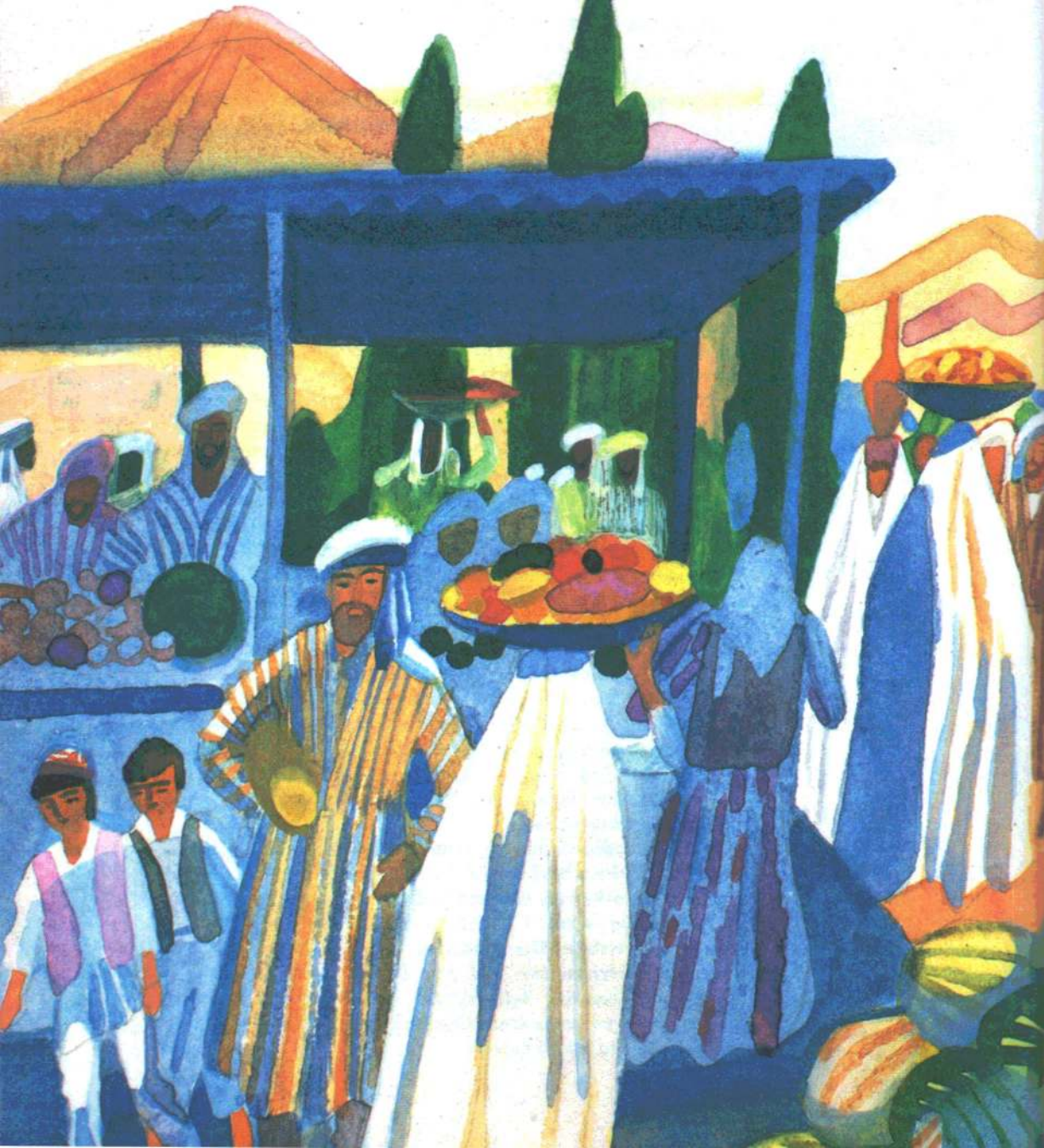
Aibek's autobiographical novella *Childhood* (1963) is a masterful rendering of his own past and that of his people, full of fascinating ethnographic details and information about everyday life in Uzbekistan in times past.

Aibek's research in the field of literature, in particular that dedicated to the world view of Alisher Navoi and the social motifs in Mukimi's work, have received wide recognition.

Aibek also worked fruitfully as a translator of the Russian classics into Uzbek. His renderings of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *Masquerade* and *The Demon*, and works by Maxim Gorky and Vissarion Belinsky are considered quite fine. Aibek also translated excerpts from Goethe's *Faust*, thus giving his people broader access to world culture.

Aibek

In the Steppe



IN THE STEPPE*

It was early morning, and a gentle breeze lent a pleasant freshness to this place which was usually so stifling in the heat. The lilting of birdsong filled the air. From the roadside arbors hung thousands of swelling bunches of sun-ripened grapes so beautiful they looked as if they had been hung there just for show. The early varieties were already plump and rosy and would soon be ripe.

Agzam and I were bumping down the road in a cart, admiring the silky azure sky and inexpressible beauty of the orchards and arbors full of the magical trilling of birds with bubbling excitement and ecstasy.

The day before, when I had come home from school, my mother had put my freshly washed cotton print shirt and calico pants on a hanger. She met me with a smile.

"You're going tomorrow!" she exclaimed.

"Where?" I asked eagerly.

"To Yangibazaar. A man just stopped by quite unexpectedly. I heard someone knocking at the gate, so I went out to see who it was, and it turned out to be someone from your father. Make sure Musa is ready to go, because I'll pick him up tomorrow at dawn. Agzam will be going with you: his father sent for him, too. I've already told his mother."

I was wild with joy! Images of the steppe and mountains immediately sprung up before my eyes. It seemed I could already see the Kazakh village with its mighty camels and swift steeds.

So it came to pass that early the next morning, Agzam and I found ourselves bumping down the road in the man's cart. We were both happy as could be.

The cart was heavily laden with staple goods and other wares: big sacks and boxes of tea, sugar, chimneys for kerosene lamps, thread, needles, and the like. Our driver, though taciturn, was calm and gentle. He would shout: "Giddy up!" at the horse, crack the whip once, probably from sheer boredom, then begin to sing some song softly to himself.

We reached a chaikhana next to the Zakh canal which gurgled along at the bottom of a deep ravine. The driver pulled on the reins, shouted: "Whoa, boy!", dismounted—for cart drivers sit astride their beasts in our part of the world—and said to us:

"Get down, boys! We're going to have a little rest and a bite to eat!"

So Agzam and I jumped down from the cart at once.

"This place is called Gysht-Kupryuk," the driver explained. "Let's unharness

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

the horse and give him a rest. He can dine on clover while we eat."

There were a lot of carts, horses, and donkeys outside the chaikhana, which was full of people. Noise and hubbub were the order of the day. Two enormous, smudged samovars were boiling away: they looked as if they hadn't been polished since the previous autumn.

The chaikhana-keeper—a thin man of about fifty—did not stop to rest for a minute. "Give us some clover for our horses!" "We need a pot of tea!" Cries rang out from all sides. The poor man was running his legs off from one end of the premises to the other. "I'm coming! I'm coming!" he exclaimed as he plopped a rusty, antediluvian tray with two hard pieces of pita bread, a teapot the spout of which had been repaired with tin plating, and two cups held together by iron staples.

Agzam and I took some of the soft pita bread our mothers had given us from our bags and ate them with pleasure, sipping at the hot tea.

"I'm burning up," said Agzam, fanning himself with the hem of his shirt.

"The sun is warmer now than it was this morning," I replied gravely, in as grown-up a fashion as I could, glancing up at the sky.

The tired driver silently downed two cups of tea and munched on the bread, then took a plug of chewing tobacco and popped it into his mouth.

The horse had finished the clover, so we harnessed him and set off on our way.

The steppe began, and occasionally we could see the gardens of Russian settlements in the distance.

The sun had reached its zenith, and the air was sweltering.

"Are you boys getting hot?" asked the driver, noticing that we were beginning to fidget. "You'll just have to be patient, because the place we're going through now is called the desert of the steppe. Look around you, and you'll see that even the grass is parched and dry," he continued, sweeping his hand through the air.

"I like everything so much I don't even feel the heat," I announced to the driver. "Look at the mountains, Agzam—see how high they are! I love the mountains more than anything! They're so beautiful I could watch them forever..." I was so overwhelmed by the sight of it all that I began to stammer.

Sometimes, kites appeared in the bright sky. They would circle overhead a time or two then disappear goodness knows where. On occasion, a flock of birds would pass quickly over our heads, and for a moment, the air would be filled with their marvelous song.

I talked and talked without stopping, first to Agzam then to the cart driver. Finally, I asked:

"When will we reach Yangibazaar?"

"It's a long way, son, two days from where you live," replied the driver. He took off his felt cap and wiped the sweat from his brow. Perhaps from tiredness, he had gone limp in the saddle and leaned to one side. "It's a hard journey, and there's nothing special about Yangibazaar. I really can't imagine why your fathers have sent for you! It's a mystery to me! Nothing but steppe and desert all the way."

Then Agzam piped up:

"That's not so; I've been there before, and Yangibazaar is wonderful. There are lots of people—I've seen them myself!"

"The only time there are a lot of people is on bazaar day once a week. The rest of the time it's quiet as the grave, and nothing but steppe. Anyway, little one, all we can do now is wait and see what your young friend Musa thinks of it. Let him have a look for himself."

But I already liked Yangibazaar in my mind, especially the Kazakhs, so I told the driver:

"I think Yangibazaar is a nice place, too. I've heard a lot about it. There are mountains and valleys, and as much koumiss as you can possibly drink."

"He's right!" affirmed Agzam. "It's a garden of paradise. I've been there three times—my father took me and my mother to see it."

"I remember," I added. "You lived at Yangibazaar for a long time once. I thought you'd never come back!"

The conversation continued in such a vein until we reached Darvishak. When we arrived, Agzam and I jumped down without even waiting for the cart to stop. The poor horse was dripping with sweat. I felt sorry for him and stroked his head, then began to pat his neck. The driver quickly unharnessed him from the cart.

The heat was unbearable. The air was scorching hot and seared my throat with every breath. All around was nothing but steppe and grass withered by the sun. The monotony was broken only by the low adobe hut in which the chaikhana was located and by a lone, scraggly tree standing next to it—nothing more.

The pitifully thin, listless, and singularly unattractive proprietor greeted us. His chaikhana was even poorer than the one at Gysht-Kupryuk. On the floor was a dusty old felt rug, and the teapots and cups were again chipped, cracked, and held together by iron staples.

"Bring us some tea, will you? We're dying of thirst!" said the driver and sank tiredly onto the rug.

We really were dying of thirst, so Agzam and I went running over to the well at once. We drew some water in an old dented bucket and took turns gulping it down. Although the water was brackish, we drank quite a lot to quench our thirst.

The driver shouted angrily at the chaikhana-keeper:

"Didn't you hear me say we were thirsty? So bring us some tea on the double! It's you I'm talking to!"

"Hold your horses! I have to let the water boil a couple of minutes," replied the man, sauntering lazily about the premises.

He brought us two loaves of pita bread on a worn tray.

A portly, bored-looking Kazakh with a comely snow-white beard and a powerful build unexpectedly began to strum his *dombra.* I was all ears, for I had never heard a *dombra* before.

To the accompaniment of the *dombra* he began to sing a slow, sad song in an unusually clear, melodious voice. It was seemingly a lament about the trials and injustices of life. The three of us listened in fascination, for the old man played well and sang with genuine pathos.

Toward the end of the day when the heat abated, we set off on our way. Evenings in the steppe are actually quite pleasant: the stars appear one by one to the wafting of a gentle breeze. The sky is an enormous dome of unparalleled beauty!

Even our laconic driver livened up a bit as darkness fell. He began ceaselessly to sing one song after another to himself, and we strained to hear him. Somewhere far in the distance, the lights of Kazakh villages were twinkling.

"The Kazakhs eat supper late," Agzam explained to me.

The driver's head swayed to the rhythm of the horse's motion, and he sang:

Only plane trees I've seen in this life, not roses prickly.
Throw wide the door for this poor wanderer, belovèd, quickly.
Your pointed brows are finer than the crescent of the moon
Pale and lovely in the sky outside my room.
I'd never give a farthing for another, for her braid is long and fine!
Beautiful beyond compare my love is, slender-waisted as a vine!

The driver cracked his whip, shouted "Giddy up!" and fell silent.

"Sing us another song, please! Any kind you like," I pleaded. "I love songs more than anything. And you can sing louder if you like."

In response to this, the driver straightened himself in the saddle, rode on quietly for a bit, then said with a laugh:

"When your road is long, a song is a true friend. Listen to this!" And at once he began to sing:

Descending from the mountain, bow and quiver in my hand,
I came upon a lithe young maid, the fairest in the land.
Your eyes are full of mischief, fair one, to my heart's delight.
Many steeds I'd give for you, but I've none, oh sad's my plight.

"Are you hungry, my little friends?" the driver asked unexpectedly, breaking off his song.

"Sure, we're hungry, but we can wait," the two of us answered in unison.

"That's good," he said, "because the way station isn't far now. I'd love to have some hot spicy pilaff tonight, but I haven't any money, nephews," he continued with a wry laugh. "But that's O.K. We can always try to borrow some. What I wouldn't give for some nice pilaff made by my own hand. I'm quite an expert when it comes to pilaff, you know. But I know that all my poor children have to eat is some watery rice soup, split pea soup, noodles without butter, watery rice gruel too disgusting to eat, or some kind of revolting swill made with flour. We're poor people, you see. It would be nice to feast on pilaff every day, but where would we get the money?"

We rode on and on under the starry sky, and every once in a while, to liven us up a bit, the driver would lie to us: "It's just a little way now. We're almost there!" The night was chilly and we were shivering with cold. We wanted to sleep, but the cart was filled with sacks and crates, so there was nowhere for us to lie down.

By the time we reached the way station, it was midnight. Everyone and everything was asleep except the dogs who barked continuously.

There was a light flickering in the chaikhana. Next to the samovar sat the chaikhana-keeper, his head nodding from drowsiness. Agzam and I lowered ourselves to the straw in the semi-darkness. After feeding the horse, the driver came into the chaikhana.

"Hey, friend, you've slept long enough!" our driver shouted. "We're starving to death. So give us some meat and lard and carrots and onions, and I'll make the rice pilaff myself. We won't bother these two sleepy boys. Look lively, man!"

"Pilaff? What pilaff are you talking about?" mumbled the proprietor sleepily, his eyes still closed. Finally, he pried the lids open and said: "Listen, brother, we haven't got any rice or carrots. There's only a little meat, and it's not very fresh. Go to sleep now, and in the morning you'll get your pilaff. Don't worry: it won't get away from you!"

The driver frowned but didn't answer. He sank down tiredly onto the straw next to us. We had our hearts set on pilaff, so we just sat there quiet as mice.

After a moment of uncertainty, the proprietor rose and stared at us as if seeing us for the first time. Reluctantly, he turned around, and by the dim light of the rude, smoking oil-lamp, spent a long time fussing about in the dark corner. At long last, he brought us a loaf and a half of dried-out pita bread on a dirty tray and a pot of tepid tea that had been standing too long then sat down to drowse again.

The driver picked up the pita bread and exclaimed: "This is hard as a rock!" He broke it into pieces with difficulty, but since we had nothing else to eat, we quickly downed the dry, unappetizing pita bread and collapsed on the straw to get some sleep.

After eating the dust of the road for two days, the next evening, we reached Yangibazaar at long last. We stopped on what was either a square or a wide dusty street, bounded by the steppe on one side and a row of tiny shops with walls of clay on the other.

Quite unexpectedly—I didn't even see which direction he came from—my father came running up to us. He lifted me down from the cart and kissed me first on one cheek, then the other. I hugged his neck tight.

Agzam jumped down and ran home to his father.

"Let's go, son," my father said. "We're going to stay with Hasan. Do you remember him?"

"Of course. He came to see us once."

"Yes, he's a good man, Hasan."

We walked along the winding streets for what seemed like ages. Finally, Father pushed open a low gate, and we entered a large, spacious courtyard.

An oil-lamp flickered on the verandah. It turned out Hasan wasn't home, and we were met by a tall, very thin man I didn't know.

"Welcome to this humble home!" he replied to my greeting with a smile.

He quickly spread out a felt rug in the middle of the courtyard and a patchwork quilt on top of that. He invited my father and me to sit down, then he said:

"I'll bring the boy a hot bowl of *shurpa*—with meat and lots of spices. He's come a long way. The torments of the road are the torments of the grave." And with that he disappeared.

The boundless sky above our heads was filled with stars. All that broke the silence was the chirping of grasshoppers and the crunching of a horse eating clover somewhere in the depths of the courtyard.

Our host returned and placed a bowl of soup and two pieces of pita bread before me.

"Well, boy, help yourself to the soup and pita bread, because it's all I have to offer. My wife and children are in Tashkent, so I've unfortunately been left to my own devices for a while."

"Tomorrow is bazaar day, so eat your soup and go to sleep. I'll wake you early in the morning. O. K.?" said my father, looking at me with a tender smile.

"You can have a look at the bazaar and drink all the koumiss you want," said our host. "Have you ever ridden a horse before, boy?" he asked me, putting a pinch of tobacco under his tongue.

"He can ride a little, but now, he'll become a real horseman out in the steppe," my father answered for me.

"If you've got a good horse under you, I'm sure it's not hard to ride," I replied with confidence.

So I hurriedly ate my soup, jumped under the quilt, and was soon fast asleep.

* * *

The bazaar was all noise and hubbub. There were clouds of dust in the air. From the foothills and valleys, from villages near and far came the Kazakhs: some arrived on horseback, some rode camels or donkeys, and the poorest came on foot. There were crowds of men and very few women. The pretentious rich men who sold sheep rode conceitedly about the bazaar on fine horses.

As I was walking around the bazaar, I heard Agzam's voice from a nearby shop. So I ran over there, said hello to Agzam's father, and shook his hand. He was a powerful, heavy-set man with thick brows and an enormous turban on his head. He sat solemnly with his legs crossed on a padded blanket folded over several times. His tiny shop was filled from ceiling to floor with lengths of calico.

I tried to convince Agzam to have a look around the bazaar with me: "Come on! Let's go!" I urged him.

"Yes, go see what you can see," Agzam's father prompted him. "You're still too little to help me with the shop."

Agzam got up, but was obviously displeased about something. As he left the shop, he said sadly:

"What a greedy old man my father is! He'd sell his mother if he thought he could make a profit."

"Is that so? He doesn't look like that kind of a person at all," I remarked in surprise.

We started at one end of the bazaar and went around to all the shops in turn: the perfume dealers', grocers', drapers', and all the rest.

Some of the shop keepers asked:

"Aren't you Tasha-aka's son?"

I blushed and tried to slip away as quickly as possible, dragging Agzam after me:

"Come on, let's go! What are you waiting for?" I kept saying.

Finally, we came to the part of the bazaar where sheep were sold. There were hundreds of sheep milling about, and the dust was thicker there than anywhere else. The trading was lively there: the rich sheep merchants were squatting and tracing patterns in the dirt with twigs. The buyers, most of whom were

Uzbeks, were carefully examining the animals, testing the weight of their fat tails and poking their sides. One of them grabbed the hand of a merchant and said: "Your sheep are not bad, respected elder. So if you will just agree to my price, I'll gladly buy them!" And he began to pump the owner's pudgy hand. But the latter replied indifferently: "Don't try to talk me down. Take another look at my sheep. They've all been well fattened, as you can plainly see. I won't sell them for less; that was my final offer." And again he proudly squatted down, becoming inaccessible once more. Both parties bargained heatedly, arguing and getting excited.

The vast majority of the shepherds were poor and dressed in tatters. In contrast to them, the rich Kazakhs, the landowning *bais* and heads of small *volosts* or rural districts, were dressed quite well. Many of them wore hats of sable, and a few sported caps of whitest felt.

We wandered about for a long time, then stopped in at the chaikhana. There were Kazakhs sitting everywhere: some were drinking koumiss, and others were sipping strong tea.

"There's a lot of koumiss and it doesn't cost much. It's too bad we don't have any money," said Agzam in disappointment.

And just at that moment, we caught sight of the driver who had brought us. Before him was a big mug of koumiss!

"Come over here and sit with me for a moment, boys! Come on, don't be shy!" the driver invited us. "What's the matter? Don't you have any money?" he inquired when he noticed our reticence.

I admitted, blushing furiously:

"No, we don't..."

"You mean your fathers didn't give you any?" he asked with a laugh.

I silently dropped my eyes. So the driver proffered me a full cup of koumiss, then gave one to Agzam. It was strong, and we could barely drink a cupful apiece.

"What's the matter with you, you little rascals? Don't you realize koumiss will cure all your ills!?" The driver turned to face me. "You in particular should try to drink a bit more, and you'll get healthier at once. Look how thin you are!" he said shaking his head in disapproval.

After roaming around the bazaar for hours, we were finally so tired we slipped into the mosque where it was as empty and quiet as if we were submerged under water. The walls of the mosque were thick and strong, but the roof was of rushes. Inside there were only a couple of rush mats. To the right was a squat hut above a precipice, and from within came muffled noises. Agzam and I quietly glanced in through a low door. Across from it sat a portly man with a coal-black beard: the teacher. He was dressed in a light, loose robe with a collar designating that he was a mullah. The ten or fifteen students were raising such a din that

we were sure the hut would collapse on their heads from the noise. A few of the boys were Kazakhs, but most were Uzbeks.

Suddenly, I recalled our Koran class and our teacher. The unexpectedness of this memory made me jump, and apparently, I even paled. Obviously Agzam was having the same thoughts I was, for we both backed away from the door and took to our heels.

"That's the last thing we need!" I said to Agzam with concern. "What if our fathers get it into their heads to send us to school while we're here?"

"I don't think mine will, because he's got too many other things to worry about," Agzam replied lightheartedly, with a wave of his hand. "But your father's strict, and if he tells you to go to school, there'll be no way of getting out of it."

I was so depressed at the thought of such a possibility that I didn't answer him.

We stopped in front of a smithy: the men were working without a break. All the Kazakhs were in a hurry and rushed the blacksmiths: "Come on, friend, let's get this finished. Faster, faster!" There was a hitching post in front of the shop where the restive mounts were tied. The tamer horses stood there quietly, as if to say: "Shoe me, I don't mind." But the mountain and steppe horses were wild: I had seen with my own eyes how they would jump over irrigation ditches to keep from crossing bridges, which they were afraid of.

The blacksmiths were having a hard time of it. Agzam and I squatted to one side and watched: it was all very interesting!

The older blacksmith was a well-built man with a powerful torso and full, thick beard. The younger—obviously his son—was a quiet lad with thick brows, a big head and broad shoulders. He seemed just as strong as his father and was dripping with sweat from the hard work. He glanced curiously in our direction from time to time.

"Hey there," his father shouted at him. "Don't you have enough to keep you busy without gawking at those two dandies?" Then he added gruffly: "Are you two from Tashkent?"

"Yes, we're from Tashkent," I replied and added in an offended tone: "Why did you call us dandies? We're poor people just like you."

Agzam punched me in the side, but so the blacksmith wouldn't notice. "Don't argue with him. Let him think whatever he wants."

Thus, we traversed the whole bazaar and returned to our fathers.

My father was sitting in a small narrow shop that was crowded even though it was half empty.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Agzam and I went walking around."

"So you had a look at the bazaar. Did you go to the sheep bazaar as well?" Father asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes, there were so many sheep we couldn't count them all!"

I looked around the tiny shop, then suddenly turned to my father and asked:

"Why do you have such a little shop? And why are there so few wares?" I couldn't understand how such a thing could be.

"To have a lot of goods, you need a lot of money, son. There are a lot of wares to be sold in this world, but I have no money to buy them. You're still too young to understand all the adversities of life," he replied gently with a slight smile. Then he fell silent and pointed with his finger: "There's koumiss in the bottle, son. Have a drink. It gets cold as ice when it stands in water from the well. But be sure to shake it up, and it'll be stronger."

I shook the koumiss with concentration, recalling involuntarily how good business was in those shops where you could find everything from calico to satin and velvet. I thought sadly to myself that my father was a poor man whose business wasn't going very well.

Just then, the town crier rode up on a small, emaciated horse: he was an old man with a white beard, a dirty turban carelessly wound about his head, and the ragged robe of a beggar.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" he cried.

The town crier announced the disappearance of a cow. He rode all over the bazaar crying one and the same thing. People began to laugh at him, and one of the Kazakhs shouted:

"Enough, old man! Don't you ever get tired! You're yelling as if you'll never again have need of your throat or we, our ears! We've already heard what you have to say, so get out of here, you old windbag!"

"Your cow will turn up somewhere. It can't have gone too far. Either it's wondering around or somebody tied it up someplace," another remarked.

"Or maybe it's already gone down somebody's gullet. There are men who can swallow a camel whole, much less a cow," came a wisecrack.

The crier didn't pay any attention to these jokes, but rode steadily on, continuing to call out the unfortunate happening to one and all.

I liked his melodious cries, so I put down my bowl full of koumiss and ran after him.

"Hear ye, hear ye! A spotted cow has been lost. A skinny spotted cow with a docked tail and a broken horn!.." His voice was hoarse and barely audible—obviously, he worked hard for his money.

The old man plodded along on his overworked mount, and I followed after for a long time, diving between horses, trying not to miss a single word. Then I returned to my father.

Towards the end of the day, the trading got livelier. The tobacconists in particular could barely manage to wait on all the customers.

Evening was approaching, and the Kazakhs began to leave in droves, some heading for the mountains, and others into the steppe.

My father closed up his shop and said:

"Let's go, son." His voice was tired. "Today we're going to Zulfi's."

Zulfi, my father's niece, gave us a hearty welcome.

"I would do anything in the world for my dear uncle! How are you, boy? How are things?" She hugged me, pecked me on one cheek, then the other, and asked: "Is grandmother well? How is your mother doing?"

"Everyone is fine. They send their love," I replied with reserve.

* * *

When I awoke, the whole courtyard was bathed in sunshine. I looked around and noticed that there was not a single tree or irrigation ditch in the yard. So I went out into the street and washed with the clouded water from the shallow artificial pool surrounded by short willow trees. The water was swarming with frogs and tadpoles.

After we had our tea, I went to Agzam's (he lived next door to us) and we set off for the bazaar together. Everything was quiet, and almost all the shops were closed.

"I haven't seen hide nor hair of our fathers. Have they gone off somewhere?" I asked Agzam.

"They all left at dawn," he replied condescendingly, like someone who knows everything.

"Have they gone far?" I asked.

"They went to Sharob-khana where the people who live far out in the steppe come to trade. Do you understand now?"

I didn't answer.

We walked through the sheep bazaar and the horse bazaar. Everything was quiet—not a soul in sight. We sat down tiredly on a stone across from one of the closed shops.

"It's nice today, isn't it, old buddy?" asked Agzam, sweeping his arm from left to right. "It's calm and quiet, and you can see the mountains from here. Just smell how clean the air is! I love Yangibazaar!"

"Maybe our fathers went to Chimkent," I said, not listening to Agzam.

"You're really weird! I already told you they went to Sharob-khana," he replied angrily, glaring at me.

"If there's only one bazaar day a week here, then this is a pretty boring place. But the air is nice; you're right about that. It's like oil being poured down your throat," I went on, pretending I hadn't noticed Agzam's irritation.

"That's Mt. Kozyrgut over there. Look how high it is!" said Agzam.

"It certainly is beautiful. It looks so close, but it's really far away," I told him.

Thus we roamed about the town, conversing about one thing and another. When we got tired of that, we went home.

I went back to Auntie Zulfi's and idled away the rest of the day somehow. When evening came, I went out to the road to wait for my father. The distant mountain tops blazed in the rays of the setting sun. I sat down on a rock and admired the sunset, for the color of the sky changed with every passing minute.

Through the thickening darkness, I heard the sound of hoofbeats. A bit later, in front of the group of horsemen, I caught sight of a familiar figure and heard the gentle voice I knew so well:

"What are you doing hanging around here all by yourself like a lost lamb?" Father asked with a grin.

I was glad he had come back, but a bit disappointed at the same time.

"It's too bad it's already so late. If it were still light, maybe I could have a ride. Will you be home tomorrow?" I asked hopefully.

"No, son, I'm afraid I won't," Father replied, dismounting. "We never know a moment's peace around here. I'll be on the road again tomorrow, so you play with your friends, and don't go too far from home by yourself. Now it's time for you to get some sleep," he concluded, patting me on the back.

So I silently set off for Auntie Zulfi's, dragging my feet. Her husband, Zakir-aka, a tall, thin, middle-aged man had just returned from parts unknown. Shaking his head with its close-cropped beard, he invited me to have some supper.

"Sit down, lad, and we'll have some bean porridge with rice and meat," he said with a smile, good-naturedly blinking his small, extremely myopic eyes: "Bean porridge is just as good as pilaff if it's well-made!"

I sat down at the *dastarkhan,* a cloth which had been spread on the ground for eating, suddenly realizing how hungry I was.

* * *

The bazaar was just as quiet as the day before, and there were no customers at any of the shops. A tight knot of young people sat close together on the mat in front of the tobacco shop. They were playing a lively game of *shatki* full of joking and merry-making—a fine pastime, to be sure.

"Come over here, son!" the swarthy owner of the grocery shop next door who suffered from trachoma called out to me. "Go bring me some water from the pool!" he told me, handing me a narrow-necked jug.

So I ran to the pool and brought him a full jug of water; he praised me:

"That's a good boy!" Then continued with more instructions: "Now sprinkle it on the ground in front of the shop to keep the dust down."

So I sprinkled a little water in front of the grocery shop and ran away, thinking to myself: "How dusty this town is!"

All the shopkeepers were stingy as could be.

Agzam and I headed for the steppe.

The sun was scorching, and everything around us seemed to quiver like quicksilver.

"Look, it's a golden eagle!" I shouted suddenly. "He's sitting over there on a rock."

"Where?" asked Agzam, looking from side to side.

"Right over there!" I replied, pointing to the place. "What an enormous bird, and how important-looking."

Agzam froze with his mouth wide open:

"What a sight!" he gasped.

We quietly crept closer to the bird.

"What if we try to get him with a stone?" I suggested excitedly.

"Too bad there aren't any Kazakhs around! They're real hunters and would get him for sure," Agzam said in a practical tone, having recovered from his initial shock.

So we started throwing stones at the bird, but couldn't reach it.

"No, it won't work," I said. "We have to get closer." I tugged Agzam along by the sleeve.

We bent down low like real hunters, carefully approached the golden eagle. Holding our breath, we threw stones at it, but still, we missed!

The eagle slowly and nobly turned its head our way, gazed at us for a moment in seeming pensiveness as if deciding whether we posed any threat, then spread its elegant wings and flew away. We remained open-mouthed on the ground, our heads thrown back, following him with our eyes.

"What a shame!"

"Too bad!"

We ranged over the steppe for a long time, wondering at its vastness, at the marvelous mountain ranges blocking the horizon in a semicircle around us. Unexpectedly, we came upon a Kazakh village in a hollow and found ourselves in the middle of someone's wedding festivities.

One of the yurts—the nomads' tents—was full of people, and there were

lots of horses all around. Unlike the Uzbeks, the Kazakhs did not keep their women apart from the men. Instead, they were all together in one merry bunch, laughing and joking freely, and patting each other on the shoulder. Some of the women were wearing velvet dresses and had matched bracelets on either wrist as well as enormous earrings and pendants. But most of them were poor and wore dirty worn dresses which had been patched and repatched.

"Where did those boys come from?" asked an old Kazakh when we peeked into the yurt. "Come in, come in and sit down!" he said and seated us on a felt rug.

Another old man, obviously a person of some stature in the village, asked: "And whose lads might you be?"

"I am Tasha-aka's son," I replied timidly, "and that," I continued, pointing at Agzam, "is my friend, Tadji-aka's son."

"We were just wandering about the steppe and came upon your wedding party quite by chance," explained Agzam.

"Well my goodness!" exclaimed several of the men. "Tasha-aka and Tadji-aka are old friends of ours! We've known them for ages!"

"Well, pour these brave lads some koumiss!" ordered the important-looking old man, and put a pile of little doughnuts in front of us on the cloth spread on the ground.

"Have a drink, boys!" piped up a moustached man, proffering Agzam and me a clay bowl of koumiss each.

We were really thirsty—our throats were parched from wandering about the steppe. So we drained the bowls in a flash.

"Well done!" laughed the man. "Pour them some more!"

"Thank you, Uncle. That's enough for us."

Our host insisted, but we blushed and refused more:

"Thank you, we'll have a little bit more later," we replied, and eagerly fell upon the doughnuts.

The bard with a long white beard flowing over his chest sang in a pleasant voice to the accompaniment of a *dombra.* His merry songs and amusing improvisations met with hearty approval and shouts of joy. He sang one ditty after another, not pausing at all, to the general laughter of all.

Soon tasty *shavlya* with lots of spicy meat was served, and we ate with gusto, then we slipped out unnoticed.

"Where's the bride?" I asked Agzam in a whisper.

"There doesn't seem to be one," he replied and shrugged his shoulders in a sagely fashion. "That's strange, indeed!"

Suddenly a wave of excitement ran through the crowd, and the Kazakhs raced for their horses who were already stamping their hooves impatiently:

the *ulak* match, resembling a game of polo, only using the body of a slaughtered kid, had begun! It was so interesting that Agzam and I stood rooted to the ground watching with bated breath.

There was a crowd of people. A pack of horsemen was trying to get at the kid: that was the only thing on any of the riders' minds: how to get to the center of the mob to seize the prize and be gone. Suddenly an elderly, thick-set Kazakh with a close-cropped beard made his horse rear and dashed to the thick of the pack. In a flash, this stalwart fellow had made his get-away with the kid under his stirrup. He raced away from the seething pack. Taken aback for an instant, the participants came to in a trice and rushed after him like a mighty wave in a wild river. The spectators were no less excited than the players, or perhaps even more so. They would wait silently in anticipation of an impending seizure of the kid, then break out into ecstatic shouts when the deed was accomplished. The competition was in full swing. First one rider then another would snatch the kid and attempt to gallop away with his catch. Even the horses were caught up in the excitement of the struggle. Some of the mounts tumbled to the ground, and their riders were unseated. After each mêlée, the crowd of riders would go tearing off, leaving behind one man with a broken arm or another with a broken leg...

The game ended sometime after noon. Then all the girls and young women gathered in one of the yurts, and a group of young men in their finest clothes followed them.

We went into the yurt with the fellows and caught sight of the bride at once. She was a pretty girl dressed like a sweet in a bright wrapper. Her round face had rosy cheeks, and her eyes flashed. Her close-fitting bridal cap was decorated with the downy plume of an eagle owl.

According to Kazakh tradition, the boys and girls began a singing competition. They cleverly improvised couplets, wittily making fun of each other. Agzam and I were amazed at their skill.

When it was the turn of the groom—a stalwart, well-dressed horseman with a broad chest like the warriors of old surely possessed—he sang softly as if greatly embarrassed. The bride answered him in her clear voice so cleverly and beautifully that all the guests broke out into merry laughter and loudly voiced their approval.

We were having such a good time, we didn't notice how late it was getting.

"Musa, we'd better go, or we'll be late getting home," Agzam whispered to me.

I didn't want to go at all, but I knew I had to, so we slipped out of the yurt unnoticed.

"It's a shame the day passed so quickly," I told Agzam, looking at the dusky horizon and darkening sky.

As we left, we could hear the fine voices of the girls and their silvery laughter wafting through the village.

We walked quickly, but it was already dark by the time we got back to town.

"You rascal!" shouted Agzam's father angrily. "Where have you been all day?"

"Musa and I went to..." Agzam began to mutter indecisively.

I tried to come to my friend's aid:

"We were at a wedding, Uncle. We drank koumiss and watched the Kazakhs play a game of *ulak.* We were having so much fun we didn't notice how late it was!"

"Get on home!" he commanded his son sternly. Then he addressed me in a threatening tone: "Just you wait, I'll see to it that you get a good licking from your father for this, or I'm not Tadji-aka!"

I bit my tongue, silently slipped through our gate, and cautiously darted into the courtyard.

* * *

The sun beat mercilessly down on us. The grocers, tobacco sellers, and chai-khana-keeper were crazy with heat and boredom. From time to time, some solitary Kazakh would appear in the square on horseback, riding a donkey, or on foot, buy some tobacco, sugar, or tea, then vanish into the boundless steppe.

"Let me have a ride on your donkey, Uncle," I begged one of the Kazakhs.

"O. K., son, climb up," he agreed amiably.

So I clambered onto the donkey.

The shopkeepers laughed and made fun of me. One of them slipped a pinch of tobacco or pepper under the donkey's tail without being noticed. The donkey began to sidestep, then bolted. He bit at his tail in a frenzy. I lost my balance and tumbled to the ground, raising a cloud of dust. The shopkeepers guffawed, glad for the excuse to have a good laugh.

One of the shopkeepers was a quiet, gentle man with a lot of books. His beard was peppered with gray, and he had a high forehead and spectacles perched on his nose, which was always poked into some book or other. Of all his books, the one I was most fascinated by was *The Arabian Nights,* but unfortunately, at that point, I could read only the Koran.

"Uncle, read me a tale from *The Arabian Nights,*" I would plead.

But the old man would shake his head.

"I'd be glad to, boy, but you're still too young. There are a lot of captivating tales in it, but some of the episodes are a bit too ribald for your tender young ears."

But I would insist, and the shopkeeper would leaf through the thin pages for a long time. At last, he would locate a suitable story and begin to read. I would listen with bated breath.

"There are many instructive passages in this story," I would tell him, "and the descriptions are interesting."

The shopkeeper would laugh and say:

"The Arabs have many such didactic tales."

And thus, the days passed.

On bazaar day, the Kazakhs began to arrive early in the morning. There were a considerable number of women among them. I looked and saw that some of the men were carrying sticks, axes, or sickles.

Instead of heading for the different shops, the Kazakhs crowded together and began to discuss something excitedly. At about eleven o'clock—I don't remember exactly—a cry rang out, and a fight began. I looked at the mêlée in terror, then darted away to my father:

"Daddy, daddy, the Kazakhs are fighting!"

But my father didn't seem at all excited: he calmly waved his hand:

"Don't worry. It's probably just one of the Kazakh clans demanding retribution for some injury or offense. They often have such blood feuds. Do you understand?" he explained, glancing in the direction of the noisy crowd. He shook his head and said: "This hubbub will probably continue until evening, so that means business will be bad today..."

I grabbed Agzam, who had just run up, by the hand and cried:

"Look over there—the Kazakhs have knives and axes!"

Sure enough, a new crowd of Kazakhs had appeared, and they were armed with axes and knives. They joined in the fracas with blood-curdling yells. The noise and uproar continued for a long time. Some of the men were injured: one got his head cracked, and another had his eye put out.

Then, from somewhere appeared the *bii*—the Kazakhs' judge—and negotiations began. The exchange of strong words continued for a considerable time, but in the end, both came to an agreement.

But even then, business didn't pick up, because it seemed the Kazakhs were in no mood for shopping.

* * *

On Saturday, my father closed his shop early, because he had decided to ascend Mt. Kozygurt with his friends. He had promised to take me with him. Of course, I was overjoyed about the coming journey.

So we finally mounted the horse, my father in the saddle and me behind him. We were waiting while the tobacco seller filled up our pouch, when suddenly our horse decided to fight with another one.

I didn't manage to grab onto my father and went tumbling right onto a rock. Hasan-aka, a friend of my father's, came running up. He was a short, wiry old man with a goatee and piercing gaze. Hasan-aka loved and often joked with me, amusing me with his engrossing tales. He scooped me up in his arms and carried me into the shop. My father was hot on his heels.

"His leg is hurt a bit," Hasan-aka told my father, then comforted me: "It'll be all right, son. For a real man, it's nothing, and you're brave as they come."

The old man bound my leg tightly with a strip of muslin and we set off. We rode through the hills and up the steep slopes with stone screes for what seemed like ages.

The sun was already touching the horizon. A fresh breeze blew from the foothills and the pure air filled our lungs making us happy as larks. The men told

jokes then fell silent for a while, captivated by the magnificent view. Quite taken by the natural beauty around me, I rode silently, admiring the crimson sunset and flecks of gold on the crests of the mountains. Sparks flew from the horses' hooves when they passed over stone screes, and the soft thudding of their hooves was pleasant to the ear as they cantered along the grass. My spirit was soaring: only the pain in my leg cast a shadow on my mood.

The meadows in the foothills were blanketed with green and filled with the delicate aroma of flowers and fragrant herbs. There were almost no trees here, and the few we saw were squat, resembling bushes more than anything.

All the horses were excellent. As we climbed the mountainside, they pranced proudly, arching their necks with particular grace. Our mounts' eyes gleamed merrily, and they were obviously enjoying their trip through this pleasant land. Some of the steeds were striking indeed. I loved them with all my heart—how beautiful our horses were!..

We would go up a slope, then descend the other side. From time to time, we passed Kazakh villages. There were herds of horses, sheep, and camels outside the yurts, and blue puffs of smoke rose to the sky from their fires.

We reached the foothills of Mt. Kozygurt itself only after darkness had long fallen and stopped at a small village. A gurgling brook wound among the trees, its source unseen.

"What a high mountain, Daddy! Are we going to climb it tomorrow?"

"We surely are. We will climb it most certainly!" he replied, eagerly nodding his head.

Everyone dismounted, and I wanted to jump down too, but my leg hurt so badly I had to cling to the saddle with both hands and lower myself gingerly. My father took me in his arms:

"Does your leg hurt badly?" he asked.

The Kazakh who met us carried a big white felt rug from a yurt and spread it out on the grass. All the men in our party found a place on it, some sitting cross-legged, and others reclining on their sides and propping themselves up with their elbows.

Father looked at me in alarm and confusion.

"Try to stand on your leg. Put some weight on it!" he said lowering me to the ground.

Biting my lip with pain, I took several steps and collapsed onto the rug.

The members of our friendly group took tea, pita bread and sugar from their saddle bags. Then they filled a narrow-necked jug with crystal-clear water and put it in the shallow pit that had been dug into the earth to serve as a hearth. The Kazakhs slaughtered a lamb and began to prepare tasty *shurpa* with mutton. We had no light except the stars in the sky, but soon, one of the horsemen

managed to obtain a lamp with a sooty, broken glass that burned dimly, barely cutting through the darkness.

The merry-making began: the men told jokes and amusing episodes, all off the cuff. They smoked a local variety of cannabis from a kind of hookah, taking turns. My father also had a few short puffs.

The night grew chilly, and I threw my father's robe over my shoulders.

There were many nightingales round about, and their clear trilling would sound out so close by, it seemed the very air around us had burst into song.

I listened to their music with enormous pleasure. Noticing this, the old Hasan-aka patted me on the shoulder with a smile.

"Listen carefully and well, my son, for there is no greater delight on all the earth than the song of a nightingale. My late father always said that this bird's trilling consisted of nine hundred and ninety-nine separate melodies. And he was probably right, my son, for the nightingale is the rarest of birds. Do you see?"

The men sat up until very late, discussing serious matters for a while, then joking and laughing a bit. They talked about all manner of remarkable happenings and recounted the adventures which had befallen their grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

Above the dark ravine was suspended the golden crescent of the moon in its first quarter. The noise of the brook gurgling over the stones, the rumble of the forest, the enormous rocks standing out in the darkness—all this seemed extremely mysterious and full of secrets to me.

After dining on the marvelous meal, I fell asleep right there on the rug.

When I opened my eyes, it was already getting light. The stars disappeared one after another, as if according to some predetermined order. The morning air was fresh and chilly, and I was quite cold. I rustled under the robe, and my father heard me and whispered:

"Go back to sleep, son, it's still early." Then, he obviously realized I was cold, for he covered me with the edge of his warm, padded robe.

But I couldn't go back to sleep, for the nightingales were singing in full force, and the air was transparent and pure. My father wasn't asleep either, for he sighed often. After a little time had passed, he rose and went to the brook to fill the jug. He lit a fire and put the water by it to heat up for tea. One by one, the other men woke up.

The whimsical outline of mountain crests spanning the horizon was gradually flooded with light by the scarlet sunrise. Soon we could see the fiery ball of the sun itself, scattering about a multitude of slanting rays. I couldn't decide which was more beautiful: sunrise or sunset. This place was so lovely and wonderful I could scarcely believe my eyes!..

"Well, son, are you going to get up?" my father asked gently. "Come on, get up and have a look at the mountains!" he prompted me, sweeping his arm in a broad gesture.

I got up but couldn't put any weight on my leg: it was quite swollen and painful.

My father and Hasan-aka were worried:

"Does it hurt a lot?" asked my father.

"Yes, I'm afraid it does, Father," I replied.

"Then lay down, boy!" Hasan-aka told me. Then he whispered to my father: "He must have been injured pretty badly," and rushed off right away.

My father sat gloomily and depressed by my side.

The tea began to boil. An enormous platter of mutton and hot doughnuts appeared. Just then, Hasan-aka came back with an egg in his hand. He carefully untied the muslin and rubbed my leg with the egg. He massaged it for a long time, and it seemed to me that the pain had diminished. Then he bandaged the leg very tightly, patted me on the shoulder and said:

"Now you just lay here for a while, and before you know it, you'll be up and frisking around like a young colt in spring!"

"By this evening, you'll be able to climb the mountain, but now you must lay still," Father told me gently.

So I lay there, staring up at the sky and felt my leg swelling even more. My father checked on me often and noticed that I was getting worse, so he began to worry more and more.

It was noon, and the men started getting ready to climb the mountain. I told my father:

"You go with them, and I'll watch you from down here."

So he got a stick and began the ascent with the others. Hasan-aka stayed behind with me. He and one of the Kazakh horsemen were going to prepare roast mutton for the rest so they could have a hot meal when they returned.

I told the old man:

"I don't think your egg helped. The swelling is getting worse and worse."

"You just lay quiet, and soon everything will be fine. Egg is the very best thing for what ails you!" replied Hasan-aka with a smile, continuing to chop onions for the dish they were preparing.

I lay there looking at the mountain with its remarkable cliffs and precipices. What an enormous thing that mountain was! I regretted bitterly that I couldn't climb it along with the others. So to lick my wounds, I made Hasan-aka tell me about mountain deer and bears.

"There are all kinds of wild animals up here, my boy," Hasan-aka said with

a knowing look, squinting in the sunlight. "There are wolves for sure, and maybe even mountain lions."

After their long climb, my father and his companions returned quite tired. Father brought me a bunch of fragrant wild flowers from the alpine meadows... The present made me happy, for I love the flowers that grow high up in the mountains.

We ate the meat Hasan-aka and the Kazakh had prepared with relish and towards evening, set out for home.

* * *

I was laying on the verandah, and there wasn't a soul anywhere around. The empty courtyard spread out before me, boundless as the steppe, and not even a single tree to feast my eyes on! About ten days had passed since I had fallen from the horse, but I still couldn't put any weight on my foot. I could limp one or two steps but no more, so I could do nothing but lay on the verandah from dawn till dusk.

Under the roof of the verandah were many sparrows' nests, so I would watch the birds flying back and forth to their young. The nestlings would cheep, stretch their necks, and open and close their tiny yellow beaks. When I got tired of that, I would watch the rooster and hens, of which there were a multitude running about the courtyard. The rooster was proud and strutted about importantly. Whenever he found a piece of grain or a grasshopper, he would call out to all the rest. The hens would surround him, cackling, and fight over the find. And if one of the hens jumped onto the roof or tried to run off to the neighbors', the rooster would angrily drive it back, fussing noisily at it all the while.

MUKHTAR AUEZOV

(1897-1961)

Soviet Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov was born into the family of the elder of a nomadic tribe in the village of Chingistau in the former Chingis volost of Semipalatinsk Region. His early years were spent in a nomadic aul where he was taught to read and write by his grandfather Auez, a friend of the poet and enlightener Abai Kunanbaev. The manuscripts of Abai's verse served as the boy's first primer. After learning the three R's from his grandfather, Mukhtar was sent to a Russian five-year school in the city. In 1919, he graduated from the Semipalatinsk Teacher's Seminary, and in 1922, the young man entered the Central Asian State University. In 1928, he graduated from Leningrad State University.

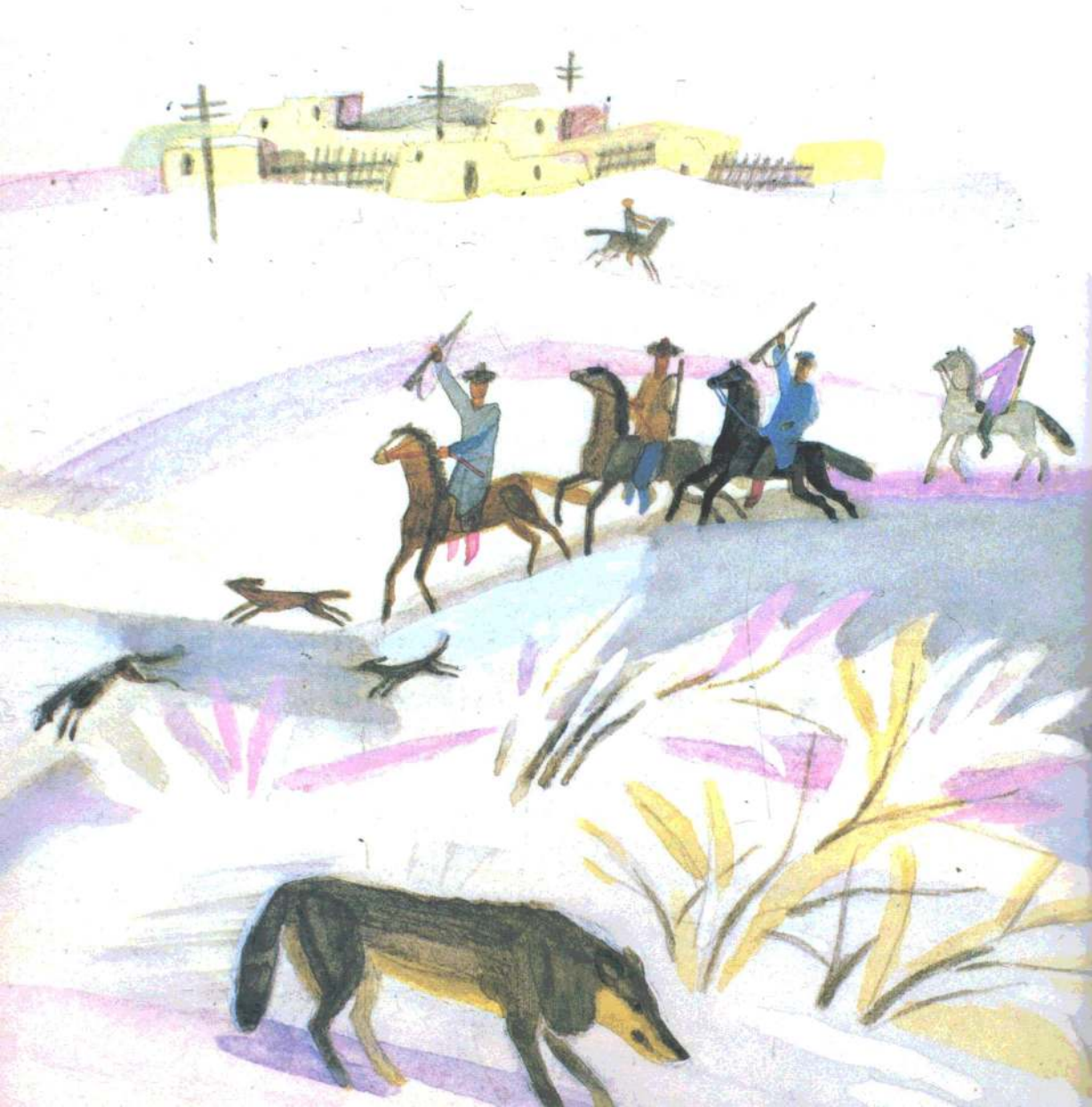
Auezov wrote more than twenty plays which reflected the various stages of social development in Kazakhstan. He devoted the last twenty years of his life to novels about classic of Kazakh literature, Abai (*Abai* and *The Path of Abai*). Before taking up his pen, Auezov did a great deal of research. During that period, he co-authored the tragedy *Abai* with Leonid Sobolev, which deals with the final years of the great Kazakh writer's life.

To Auezov's credit are such dramatic works as the play *Night-time Peals* about the 1916 uprising in Kazakhstan, *The Hour of Trial,* and *Guard of Honour* (with co-author Aljappar Abishev) about the heroic efforts of the Soviet people during World War II and the feats of the 8th Guards Division commanded by General Panfilov. Well known are his travelling notes—about India, in particular—and sketches of the virgin land collective farms and many other topics pertinent to his land.

He has been quite active in the field of translation as well. Gogol's *Inspector General,* Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew,* and Pogodin's *The Aristocrats* appeared in his translation on the Kazakh stage.

Mukhtar Auezov

Fierce Grey



FIERCE GREY*

Although the big ravine near Black Hill seemed deserted, it was well known to the shepherds of the surrounding auls. Misfortune quite often came from this ravine.

Black Hill, like with a fur hat, was covered with low-growing bushes. The ravine was densely overgrown with dogrose, and beneath its prickly thick carpeting were hidden wolves' lairs.

A chilly May breeze blew fitfully from the ravine, carrying with it the fragrance of young grass and wild onion. The bushes stirred and rustled sombrely and drily, as if they were whispering among themselves.

Late in the spring a wolf and his mate came to the ravine to their old lair. The old lairs had been washed out by flood water, and now a man could easily crawl into them. The wolves dug up a new, more compact lair nearby and connected it with the old by narrow and dark burrows.

Wolves' paws soon trampled down the freshly-dug earth. The she-wolf's whitish coat hadn't even finished shedding when smoky-grey cubs appeared in the den.

One quiet morning the she-wolf lay torpidly in the full blaze of the sun, beneath the high panicles of sorrel. The spot was sheltered from the wind, and she drowsed, overcome by the heat, from time to time half-opening a lacklustre eye. Her flanks were sunken in, her udder swollen with milk. The fur on her back twitched nervously, her nipples quivered incessantly.

A faint crackle echoed from behind the bushes. The she-wolf jumped up, sending white clumps of fur flying up from the ground. Baring her teeth, she let out a low growl. The cubs floundered at her feet.

The next moment the carcass of a lamb came flying across the thick wall of spreading branches and landed with a thud in front of the she-wolf. A large, heavily-built wolf came bounding out silently, his tail drooping low to the ground. He sniffed the she-wolf, reddish froth dripping from his muzzle, and she greedily licked his bloodied chops.

The lamb was still breathing. The wolf and his mate threw themselves upon it and in a minute's time had torn it to pieces. Two white-toothed voracious jaws devoured the light, tender meat in large chunks. Green eyes glittered malevolently.

Having devoured every scrap of the lamb, the wolves lazed in the succulent, fragrant grass, stretching themselves out full length. Then they began taking turns belching up the swallowed meat.

The cubs crawled one by one towards the meat, and pushing one another

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

and growling, began to toss it about. Only two, the last born, were still blind. The she-wolf dragged them to her and pushed them to her nipples.

The next day, when the sun was at its zenith, the she-wolf caught the heavy smell of horses in the distance. Quickly shoving the cubs into the lair, she hid herself in the bushes.

There were sounds of people's voices, the stamping of horses' hooves.

The people rode right up to the den and dismounted. Long shepherds' cudgels struck sharply against the earth.

The she-wolf stood in the dogrose on the steep slope of the ravine, her tongue dangling from her open jaw. She could see everything.

Throwing stout leather ropes over the necks of the cubs, the men dragged them one by one from the dark lair. They killed off five of them right out. They broke the hind legs of one and flung it beside the gnawed head of the lamb. The cub would crawl, and whimper, and the wolves would carry it off, not to return to these parts for a long time. The runt of the litter the people carried off with them.

The clatter of horses' hooves faded from the ravine. The mature wolf with the dark crest on its back and the white she-wolf approached the motionless cub and bared their teeth savagely at it, then at one another. The she-wolf snatched up the cub and made her way up along the ravine. The male followed with great, springing bounds.

The lair was left deserted.

In the aul there lived a young boy called Kurmash. It was he who adopted the still sightless cub as a pet. The elders said: the grey cub was brought among people before it even opened its eyes—perhaps it'll grow up tame.

Kurmash never left the cub's side; he prepared a clean saucer for him and a soft leather collar.

In two days' time the cub opened its eyes, but did not venture out of the yurt—from outside came the sound of barking and the terrible stench of dogs. At night Kurmash would place the cub next to him under the covers. The boy now slept separately from his old grandmother, whom he loved more than anyone else on earth.

She was the only person who looked disapprovingly upon his attachment to the weak, transparent-grey little beast with sharp teeth.

"He couldn't see yet, and he had already grown fangs," Grandmother said. "As soon as he can stand on his feet, he'll flatten back his ears like all wolves do."

And the boy grew angry at her.

By mid-summer the cub had grown big and strong and was almost indistinguishable from the other aul pups the same age. If he were a little bit shaggier he

could have passed for a young wolfhound. But living in the aul was like being in captivity for him. Just like old Grandmother, the shepherds' dogs would not accept him, and he was met by the growling and gnashing of teeth every time he ventured out of the yurt.

Kurmash would beat them off, and the devoted watchdogs would slink away snarling, their pride wounded. But the yurt was crowded, stuffy and boring for the cub. He longed for the steppe, the tall, many-colored grasses, the unexplored expanses.

Once the full-grown skewbald hound from the Big Yurt seized an opportunity when the boy was not there and drove the cub from his yurt, and mauled him for quite some time. The other dogs rushed over and began sinking their teeth into the grey cub's legs and sides barking frenziedly. Children and adults came running, and barely managed to extricate the cub. Tattered, badly bitten, the cub crawled off towards the yurt, sat down with his back to it and soundlessly bared his white-toothed jaws.

"Not a whimper... He's a proud one!" the men marvelled. "A pup would have rent the ground by now with its wailing."

But the women said:

"He's a thief! That's why he's so quiet."

And they were right. Even Kurmash was amazed and alarmed by the cub's voracious appetite. The boy fed him much better than the dogs. But the cub never seemed to be able to get his fill.

The aul dogs were lean and undemanding. The cub's flanks and chest filled out, and the back of his neck got noticeably fatter. But he was continually hungry and kept sniffing and poking about the yurt with his moist, black nose.

When a person was around, the cub would not touch the food, turning his muzzle away. But as soon as he walked away, the cub would instantly devour everything placed before him, and would then stare longingly at the empty bowl, as if he hadn't eaten a thing. When nobody was looking, he greedily seized everything that had been left carelessly lying within his range. He would drag off boiled meat set out for the master, lap up yoghurt from the copper pot, gnaw on fresh hides, hung up to dry on the wooden frame of the yurt.

He was often caught red-handed, and thrushed unmercifully. He came to know the blows of the rolling-pin, which made his head buzz, and the sharp, burning pain from the hissing lash. Dodging agilely, he would silently bare his white fangs. But not once did he ever give voice to his pain.

Meanwhile, rumors crept through the aul that at night, undetected by the dogs, he had been making his way into the sheep-pens and sniffing the lambs, and that the sheep were afraid of him. Someone had seen him stealing away into the steppe.

Kurmash refused to listen to the aul gossip. But no matter how hard the boy tried, how he remonstrated with his pet, the cub could not understand why the food he stole was any worse than that which they offered him.

He did not fear Kurmash, and ate in his presence. When the boy offered him some meat, the cub would not take it gently, but would snatch it out of his hands. But Kurmash never once gave him the taste of the stick which he used to drive off the dogs. The boy admired the cub, his sullen, independent stare, the menacing ruff of darkening fur on his neck, his stubborn strength which was growing with every passing day.

And Kurmash named his pet Kokserek, which means Fierce Grey.

By the end of the summer Fierce Grey bore little resemblance to the aul dogs. Long-legged like a calf, as steep-backed as a bull, he outstripped them all. He did not lift his tail up like a dog, and thereby appeared even taller, and his neck and back resembled a drawn bow.

He no longer ran from the skewbald hound and the dogs stopped provoking

him. He had only to turn his high-domed, stone-grey head towards them and curl his upper lip for the dogs to run helter-skelter. Usually when they caught sight of him, they would stick together in a pack. And both he and they were always on guard.

No one had ever seen the wolf playing about in the aul. Nor did he play with Kurmash. He knew his name well and came running when Kurmash or old Grandmother would call him, but he ran unhurriedly, at a lazy lope, and did not wag his tail.

He did not touch the dogs, did not respond to their barking, nor try to pursue them as they ran away. Most often he lay in the shade of the yurt, his sharp ears pricked up, gloomily squinting his green eyes.

Kurmash took pride in his taciturn, green-eyed pet and laughed merrily when the neighbors' dogs took to their heels with squeals of fright. If the truth were to be known, the boy himself was sometimes a bit afraid of Fierce Grey, but he would never have admitted it, not even to old Grandmother.

The master of the skewbald hound bragged:

"What's so great about your hang-tailed cur! My hound would make short work of him if he had half a chance! He would have finished him off long ago if we hadn't pulled him off."

Once passing by, just to see what would happen, he set his hound on Fierce Grey. Without a second's hesitation the hound had thrown himself upon the wolf with furious barking and sank his teeth into the wolf's shoulder. He had aimed for the neck, but missed his mark. At the last moment the wolf dodged aside and before the hound had a chance to jump away, silently, in a bound, seized him by the ruff of the neck and flung him onto the ground. The enormous hound rolled down a hillock like a fat, helpless sheep. The wolf also missed his mark, for he would have torn out the hound's throat.

Kurmash ran out and called back Fierce Grey, and the master drove off his skewbald hound.

Later in the evening two wolves attacked the sheep which grazed near the aul.

The shepherd raised a frantic cry, and the men and older boys came galloping on horseback from the aul. All the aul dogs came tearing along to the rescue with deafening barking, and Fierce Grey came too.

The wolves slipped back into the steppe. They chased after them, but to no avail.

The riders and dogs came to a halt at the near hills. In the distance, on the high crest of Black Hill, two grey shadows glided in the dim light.

"They're early this year," the shepherd said.

And Kurmash was the only one who noticed Fierce Grey silently setting out along the wolves' tracks, his muzzle almost down to the ground.

The boy fell behind the rest and headed fearlessly on foot into the darkness, towards Black Hill. He called coaxingly for a long time:

"Kokserek! Kok-se-rek..."

But Fierce Grey did not return.

The wolf showed up in the aul that night. Stopping in front of his yurt, he unhurriedly scratched the dry, trampled earth with his iron claws, raising up clouds of dust. He lifted his head towards the starry sky and inhaled the cold autumnal air, greedily sniffing in the faint puffs of wind coming from Black Hill.

He spent the next day in the aul, but when night came he headed once again for the steppe.

He returned three days later, emaciated, hunger-ravaged, but just as sullen as before and without his collar. When Kurmash called him, he walked over, his head lowered almost threateningly. The boy threw his arms around his short, muscular neck happily. The wolf tore itself away, its ears flattened, but even Grandmother refrained from scolding him and bustled around preparing his food.

He ate with savage fury, and Kurmash backed off and watched from a distance.

"Aha! The wolf in him is beginning to show," Kurmash's father said. "The creature's eyes are the greenest of green—they even glow in the daytime. It's time we did away with him, son."

And the boy shuddered, afraid that the adults would no longer let him have his way, that they could destroy his wolf.

But Fierce Grey seemed to understand that they were saying about him. The moment they turned their backs he was gone. No one saw him leaving the aul. For many days afterwards Kurmash searched for him in the thickets, calling in a voice now filled with anguish, now with threat. But all in vain! The windy autumn passed, and the severe winter blanketed the steppe with white felt. Fierce Grey did not return.

Until late autumn he subsisted on young hares, far from his home territory, and was not above catching mice. He feasted on fat gophers with the relish of a fox. But once the snow came, hunger drove him to people's winter quarters, to the sheep pens.

Now he slunk around stealthily, like he had never belonged. His fur bristled whenever he caught sight of people.

Night after night he circled around, dodging along snow-covered hills, leaving the quicksilver traces of heels and claws on the snow. Steam swirled up from his slightly wrinkled grey muzzle. He would stop, and the heavy smell of the

cattle shed and livestock would assail his nostrils, while the dogs' anxious barking would hit his ears. The wolf savagely gnashed his fangs. Now the dogs were just as keen-nosed as he was hungry.

In the dead of a blizzardy night he attempted to approach the sheds. But the restless dogs seemed to know where he was coming from. He was met by the whole pack, led by the skewbald hound, and driven away.

The wind died down, and the ground began to freeze. The wolf shifted around, squatting on his hind legs. The hard crust of ice over the snow burned his heels, the black corners of his mouth froze, hunger pangs pinched his belly. The wolf loped up the hill. The snow sparkled in the bright moonlight. Fierce Grey threw his head up towards the sky and, frozen in a convulsive languor never before experienced, let out a long, protracted, melancholy howl.

Frenzied barking immediately flared up in the aul.

Fierce Grey did not lower his head. All of a sudden from distant Black Hill there came an indistinct, melancholy echo. The wolf straightened up, quivering. Someone was echoing him, luring him. He listened intently, and then thrust his nose forward and ran swiftly towards the call.

At the descent to the large ravine he stopped, wary, trembling from the bitter cold. A snow-white she-wolf descended towards him from Black Hill.

Fierce Grey did not allow her to come near him. As she came closer, he bounded aside, his teeth bared, ears pinned back. But he was unable to leave. And when she followed in his tracks, sniffing him, and then turned with a plaintive yelping and thrust her warm nose into his groin, he remained perfectly still. The she-wolf ran quietly off. He caught up with her and licked her cheek.

Shoulder to shoulder they set out upwards along the ravine, traversed it, and then made for the people's dwellings. In a half hour's time they set down a gigantic semicircle of rare double tracks along the crests of the hills, and only the ice-covering crunched resonantly beneath their paws, as they ran tirelessly on and on. Then, as if they had come to an agreement, they raced, side by side, down towards the aul.

The moon had set. The night was drawing to an end. Fierce Grey and the white she-wolf flew like a whirlwind through the aul, and both saw a shaggy, long-haired hound come tearing out towards them from the yellowish snowdrift by the sheepfold, drawing the entire pack along behind him. This, of course, was the skewbald hound.

The wolves tore at full speed out of the aul. The hound kept pace with a strained, violent barking. The pack straggled out behind him. And Fierce Grey slowed his gallop, listening maliciously to the barking—the hound was bursting with rage.

Near a hollow the pack came to a halt, and the skewbald hound also ran

back towards the pack. The she-wolf went after him first.

In the deserted steppe it is difficult for a dog to evade a wolf. But the hound showed no sign of fear, even though he was alone. The purpose of his life was to fight the wolf, and he tackled the she-wolf without hesitation. Then Fierce Grey fell upon him, crushing him underneath. With a high-pitched snarl the she-wolf bit into the hound's throat.

Soon the only thing left of the enormous hound were his tail, his gnawed head and a few sparse tufts of black and white fur. The wolves even lapped up the bloodied snow.

Having eaten their fill, they trotted back towards Black Hill and lazed on the untouched snow in the ravine.

From that night on they were inseparable. And a grey misfortune began to stalk the district.

Here and there, near Black Hill and far away, the wolves killed sheep, slaughtered cows and horses, brought down camels, destroyed the best watchdogs and slipped away with impunity.

The alarming news spread from aul to aul.

"There's a whole pack of them, the grey devils, and like werewolves, none of them are afraid of people. Not the least bit! The leader stands as tall as a calf, and is terribly strong and fearsome... He doesn't run even when a person comes near him! You're afraid to approach him. The pack attacks from one direction, the shepherds rush over, the dogs take after them, and meanwhile the leader comes from the other side and carries off a ewe on his back..."

The wolves never stayed long in one place. One day they would be spotted near Black Hill, the next, ten, fifteen or twenty miles to the south or east. It is just as they say: a wolf's belly is only as full as its legs are strong and fast.

The steppe in that part of the country was hilly, abounding in ravines and overgrown with bushes. It was a wonderful sight from Black Hill: it arched with its high banks and churned with shaggy crests. Such places were well suited for the wolf, but made life quite difficult for the shepherd. It was a simple matter for the wolf to make its way undetected towards the herd in the pen, easy to lie in wait and to cut off an animal which straggled off. And it was hard to track down the grey phantom, impossible to guess from which corner his smoky shadow would spring out. And in winter you might be able to follow his tracks, but you still couldn't catch him! The snowdrifts were deep. The layer of ice over the snow would support a wolf's weight, but not a horse and rider's. A horse kept falling through and just ploughed up the snow.

At the big ravine where they had found wolves' lairs more than once, they tried setting out poisoned meat, only to regret it later. Would werewolves take poison? The young half-witted aul dogs found the meat by the ravine and there

their bodies remained lying. The wolves would have no part of the stiffened dogs' carcasses either.

That winter the wolves ate their fill. Fierce Grey grew and broadened out, but as before he could never satisfy his terrible hunger for meat and blood.

Only towards spring did his hunger seem to subside somewhat, and for a short time another hunger raged in his blood.

The snow in the steppe grew soft and turned dark. Ragged thawed patches appeared on the hills, baring the reddish, clayey earth.

Fierce Grey was overcome by an unprecedented playfulness. On the run he would circle and rush around the she-wolf like a puppy. She would lie down to rest and he would dance up nearby, raising up whirlwinds of sparkling snow, and jump foolishly over her, shoving her with his chest, paws and muzzle. She would snap angrily, but he would take her by the neck and hold her for a moment before releasing her. Sometimes he would pull her about by the scruff of the neck for quite a while. She would squeal shrewishly and bite.

Then she grew more gentle and began to sniff and lick him more often.

North of Black Hill lay broad, shallow, saltwater lakes. Their banks were densely overgrown with rushes and reeds. These were wild, uninhabited places—no wonder the raucous cries of birds resounded constantly above the thickets. It was to this spot that the white she-wolf led Fierce Grey in the spring, when the lake banks had turned a lush green.

Now he hunted far from his native haunts. The she-wolf did not leave the lair and fed upon birds' eggs found among the rushes.

Once he brought her a sheep's rump, but this time she was not there to greet him beside the lair as usual. He agitatedly scraped the earth with his paws, and she crawled out of the lair, weakened, barely dragging her legs.

A powerful, unfamiliar smell emanated from the lair. Fierce Grey gnashed his teeth menacingly, shoved his muzzle into the lair and pulled out a shaky, unprepossessing cub.

Yelping weakly, the she-wolf rushed towards him, but could not stop him. Fierce Grey beat the small blind cub against the earth until it was only a formless grey mass, and then flung it away with disgust.

When he turned back to the she-wolf, she was lying between him and the lair, and more cubs were crawling towards her, seeking her nipples.

Fierce Grey lay down off to the side, licking his chops morosely.

The she-wolf began to hunt with him again, but she was still sluggish and clumsy and ran continually back to her litter. Very often they would return to the lair after an unsuccessful hunt and he would look longingly at the cubs. She would nip him and drive him from the lair.

One early April morning, when the cubs had already opened their eyes, Fierce

Grey and the white she-wolf were running along the lake to their lair, she—ahead, not allowing him to overtake her, he—right at her tail. Suddenly they scented humans. The birds swarmed in great clouds up above their nests, horses' hooves clattered, shepherds' clubs struck against the earth... The wolves hid among the reeds until everything had grown quiet once more. Then, stealing up to the lair, they found there only one cub with broken legs.

For several days the she-wolf roamed persistently around the aul, where the humans had taken her other cubs. Fierce Grey called to her in vain. She would not go to him—and they were noticed.

The earth had dried up and flowered. Grazing on the succulent spring grasses, the horses quickly picked up strength. And one warm, cloudless day the wolves heard a noisy pursuit behind them. Three riders on lightning-fast horses drove the wolves from the big ravine by Black Hill.

Fierce Grey flew like an arrow. Even in the ravine the she-wolf lagged behind him. Her nipples had not yet dried up, and she was heavy on the run. At first Fierce Grey turned back and ran up behind her, nipping her sides and urging her on. She began to growl at him. He looked back at the riders and silently, swiftly shot forward.

At the end of the ravine he turned sharply and with great springing leaps, like a mountain goat, bounded upwards along the steep side of the ravine overgrown with prickly dogrose.

Fierce Grey hid in the bushes, but the white she-wolf rushed straight across an open space, and the riders went galloping after her, whooping and hollering.

That night Fierce Grey, snorting, trotted warily along the tracks of the hunt. In a distant hollow on grass damp with dew he found a patch of dried blood. He sniffed, licked it. Here had lain the white she-wolf and here her scent ended.

Fierce Grey sat on his haunches and remained motionless, tensing his bulging chest, hunching his brown neck, until the moon rose in the sky. And then he howled, low and mournfully.

As if turned to stone, Fierce Grey sat in the hollow until morning. Just before dawn he rose, yawning spasmodically. Hunger had turned his belly cold.

All summer long he roamed about the steppe alone, striking fear in the herds and auls. The night brigandage never stopped, and the shepherds cursed their fate. There seemed to be only this single grey wolf with brown markings on his back, which roamed by Black Hill, near the salt lakes and all around, yet in one summer's time it had slaughtered no less than half a hundred lambs and calves! His belly was a bottomless pit.

Twice they came in pursuit on fresh horses with a pack of swift dogs, and both times he managed to escape them. With his heavy belly the brigand was

light on his feet, and tireless. The wolf did not run, but fairly flew away, putting the fleet horses to shame.

During the day he hid, slept in the dark tangled thickets of rushes at the marshy lakes, but at night nothing stopped him—neither a man's shout, the dogs' barking, nor the thunder and fire of a rifle shot. In vain the shepherds wasted cartridge after cartridge, aiming at the grey shadow. The shots whistled wildly over the flocks, and the echo had barely faded in the black gloom before the wolf was back, unscathed.

Fierce Grey filled out in the course of the summer. His thick coarse fur stood erect, but his belly was drawn and knew not a moment's peace.

He took to going after herds of mares with their young. He would slip stealthily up towards a young foal, seize it by its short tail and hold it. The foal would struggle violently to break itself loose; the wolf would suddenly set it free, and it would go rolling head over heels. Then the wolf would attack, and its claws would close over the victim's throat.

The autumn flew by quickly with its bad weather and once again snowstorms would howl for days on end and blanket the steppes.

One bright, frosty night Fierce Grey unexpectedly encountered a large wolf pack on the bare crest of a hill. Sweeping up a whirlwind of prickly snow dust, the pack flew towards him and surrounded him. Fierce Grey found himself nose to nose with the leader—an enormous, experienced brute with clouds of frosted vapour coming from his bared jaws.

But the pack understood from the first that they had encountered not another victim, but the master of these parts. Dropping to his haunches, his tail tucked beneath his legs, Fierce Grey gnashed his iron fangs. He was half as young as the leader, but was his equal in both height and weight; none of the others in the pack had such high, smooth flanks.

The females were the first to approach and begin sniffing Fierce Grey. Then the younger males made their way cautiously towards him. But he did not allow himself to be sniffed by the leader, and the two held each other at a distance. The newcomers lay down on a mound of firmly packed snow and began swallowing bits of frozen ice. Fierce Grey joined them. And he left with the pack, keeping pace with the leader.

A blizzard started up towards morning. Fierce Grey led the pack to a herd of horses. They cut off a two-year-old mare, drove her into a deep snowdrift, and Fierce Grey brought her down, as he had once brought down the skewbald hound. The wolves fell upon the horse from all sides. Fierce Grey seized hold of the shoulder, as was his custom, only to jump back from a dull blow of fangs in his side. The leader stood beside him, gnashing his teeth: Fierce Grey had touched his, the most honored part of the kill.

However, there was no time for fighting at the moment—the mare's carcass was melting away. The younger wolves sank their heads up to their ears into the mare's belly. The she-wolves tore chunks of meat, shoving each other and snarling. Fierce Grey and the leader returned to the tight circle.

The last hind leg was left to them. The others drew a respectable distance away and lay watching, their heads on their paws, as the two tore up the meat, gnawing and crunching on the bones. Both walked away at the same time, breathing heavily, with bellicose sideway glances at one another, their muzzles smeared in blood up to their eyes.

They lay down separately in the center of the pack. The she-wolves circled around Fierce Grey. He did not take his green eyes off the old leader.

They led the pack together for another few nights, keeping pace neck to neck, and if one were to pull a half-step ahead, the other immediately sank its teeth into its side or leg.

The nights were clear, windless, hunger-filled. Rage seethed in Fierce Grey's mute throat.

The wolves were making their way along the slope of a ravine when a hare burst out from under their feet. It darted and bounded just ahead of the wolves' noses for no less than a mile before it was crushed. Fierce Grey and the old leader seized it simultaneously and tore it in half. The pack lagged far behind them.

Both greedily devoured their portions and threw themselves upon each other. Clumps of snow and tufts of fur flew up fanwise. The gnashing of fangs resounded in the silence.

The two mature wolves fought, standing on their hind legs, grappling with their front paws, digging up a deep hole in the snowdrift underneath them. For a second they broke apart. The old leader snarled; he was willing to end it at that. But Fierce Grey attacked and managed to seize him below the ear—the method wolf-hounds are known to employ. He crushed the old wolf underneath his belly and instantly sank his teeth into the crest of his powerful neck. He tightened his claws, like pincers, and broke the old wolf's neck.

The old leader lay on his side in the snow, feebly baring his jaws. The rest of the pack arrived and instantly tore him apart to the bones. The wolf shows no mercy on anything lying in the path—not even its own kind.

Night and day the horse herders maintained their vigil, yet they were helpless to protect their herds. Such terror, such brigandage had never before been known in the Black Hill district. The wolves mowed down everything living right before the shepherds' eyes.

Fierce Grey led his pack from one winter shed to another from sunset to dawn. The wolves quickly put on weight and grew heavy, but their leader did not allow them to sleep for long. He would howl and bite even the females, and they in turn would drive the younger wolves. The pack would come tearing down from the lair like an avalanche.

And there was one instance when the grey band attacked a man. A solitary traveller was driving a sledge along a well-beaten track. Only rarely would a wolf venture to approach such a road and cross it, especially if people were travelling upon it. But Fierce Grey hesitated only briefly, pinned back his ears, and went galloping after the sledge.

The horse bolted. The pack overtook it, and forced it off the road into a snowdrift. The sledge got stuck, the horse sank down up to its chest, and the wolves straddled it in a grey heap.

The traveller, terror-stricken, jumped from the sledge and began scrambling through the deep snow. Fierce Grey leapt over the sledge and tore after the fleeing man with short light bounds. Two she-wolves immediately followed the leader.

Fierce Grey, as if playing and testing his powers, made a broad circle and stopped directly in the man's path. The she-wolves came to a halt behind the back of the doomed, defenseless, and yet inviolable two-legged creature, waiting. Would the grey leader touch the human? Bring him down on all fours?

The man was saved by other people. A rumble and tramping of horses' hooves echoed from the nearby hill. Two riders came racing at a full gallop into the hollow with piercing whistles and shouting.

Fierce Grey curled his upper lip, glanced around, and then loped off with increasing speed along the untouched snow. The pack abandoned the remains of the horse and melted into the dusky, wind-churned steppe.

And still another time Fierce Grey attempted to grapple with a man—openly.

This happened during the day. The steppe was bound with a hard frost. The whitish, pale blue sky was enveloped by a scintillating haze, through which the crimson, bloody eye of the sun peered out sullenly.

The wolves had made their way right up to the aul, their frosty breath rising up like smoke. And suddenly from the farthest winter shed a two-humped camel came heading straight towards the pack. There was a person sitting between its humps, and his head was wrapped in white—this was a woman's headdress.

Fierce Grey pricked up his ears.

This was not a horse, and the rider was not a shepherd or a herdsman. The dogs barked, but did not stick their noses out of the aul. The pack froze, anticipating an easy kill. However, the camel raised its thick-lipped head and headed straight towards the pack with an even, sweeping trot. The wolves began to rush

about, colliding against one another, and spurted away into the steppe.

A strange camel! Where was he running? Why wasn't he afraid? And the rider was strange too—he didn't shout, whistle, or even wave his hands.

The wolves ran without glancing back. And Fierce Grey also ran. The camel stopped, snorting loudly. The biting January wind stirred the long dingy-brown hair on its flanks. The woman sat motionless between its humps, only the scarf on her head billowed up in the wind.

The fur stood up all over Fierce Grey's body. He seemed to become rooted to the ground and sniffed the air, extending his head with its high forehead and sharp-pointed ears.

Nothing out of the ordinary... He was not afraid of two-legged creatures; rather, it was he who always frightened them, even before he was full-grown, while still living in the aul. And here in the open steppe he was the most terrifying of all.

The pack had scattered out, looming indistinctly on the distant hills in the radiant frosty haze. Fierce Grey lingered behind. And when the camel once again threw up its head and charged after him, he unhurriedly trotted towards the hills, his tail low, almost dragging through the snow, luring the rider farther from the aul, closer to the pack.

When the camel halted, the wolf sat down immediately. When the camel took off at a trot, the wolf trotted along in front of it. The distance between them gradually decreased. Fierce Grey measured the distance patiently, coldly.

At last the aul was hidden behind a snowbound hillside, and there was the pack!

Fierce Grey straightened up and began maneuvering the way he had the day before with the solitary traveller, bounding, almost playfully around the camel, cutting off its path to the aul. The camel shuffled around in one spot and let out a raspy bellow, and Fierce Grey saw how the emboldened pack tore down at once from the hill.

But then he failed to notice how a smooth black stick suddenly appeared between the camel's humps. It gleamed in the sun and had a round, unblinking eye at its end.

And then, from the cloudless winter sky, thunder struck. The booming echo bounced along the surrounding hills. An invisible lead wasp sank into the wolf's thigh and burned its way through. For the first time in his life Fierce Grey gave voice to his pain. Yelping frenziedly, he bit into his thigh and somersaulted over his head, also something he had never done before.

Leaping up, Fierce Grey made his way on three legs, half-crazed with pain, away from the bellowing camel. Frozen human hands were not able to re-load the weapon in time, and the wolf disappeared in a hollow. A long thread of

bright red droplets stretched out along his three-pawed tracks.

Somehow Fierce Grey managed to reach the big ravine by Black Hill and here he threw himself down on the snow. His shot thigh burned like a smouldering firebrand. The wolf began to lick the wound from the outside and in his groin, trembling and pricking his ears in fright.

The pack had left, and now nothing would lure them back to these parts. And it was good that they were far away and that the young wolves hadn't caught the scent of his fresh blood, hadn't seen him lying in the red-stained snow—that's when they would have gotten even with him!

There was no sound of pursuit either. The strange camel had not followed his trail, but Fierce Grey feared something else. He waited for the sound of dogs' barking and the pounding of horses' hooves.

But the people tarried. It took them some time to gather together the pack. The dogs would not leave the aul—they could sense the approach of an icy, protracted blizzard.

The frost did not let up, and the wind gained intensity. The steppe moaned. And the entire vast expanse was a solid curtain of snow, extending from the earth to the heavens.

Fierce Grey slowly raised himself up. Looking around, he trotted on three paws, from time to time convulsively shaking the fourth, to the rush thickets on the salt lakes.

For three days the steppe snowstorm howled and day was undistinguishable from night. For three days Fierce Grey did not venture out of the snow-blanketed rushes. He dug himself down into a snowdrift, tucked his nose into his tail, and the blood did not freeze in his veins. It kept him warmer than the hearth of the yurt.

The grey wolf grew weak and thin, but the ragged wound in his groin closed up and began to heal.

On the fourth night he dug his way out and, limping heavily, headed towards the steppe. While running his muscles loosened up and the limping became less noticeable, but the pain did not slacken.

For an entire week he went hungry. He looked for carrion, but without success. Only towards the end of the week did his luck take a turn for the better: he stumbled upon a mare and her foal who had lagged behind the herd. He killed the foal and then lay down beside it and kept eating the whole night long, without stopping. He belched and ate, belched and ate, tucking his numb wounded leg beneath his bloated belly.

Another week passed. The wolf's thigh healed up and ached less often. He began to run faster and grew bolder. He was drawn towards Black Hill again.

Towards evening he made his way to the aul in which he had been raised

and stood on the crest of the hill, his fur standing on end from ears to tail. The camel was nowhere in sight. And there was no barking—the dogs were with the herds in the steppe. Fierce Grey descended and started roaming around the familiar paths and places, his moist nose against the wind.

From far away came the faint sweet smell of the sheep. Fierce Grey curled his lip. On the horizon, in the pale yellow light of dawn, loomed the tall figure of a rider. A small flock of sheep clustered at the horse's legs. The shepherd was leading them to the pen.

The wolf rushed to cut them off, hiding behind knolls and hillocks. He darted out, as usual, swiftly and unexpectedly, but the shepherd spied him immediately and then suddenly cried out in a thin, child's voice, desperate, but commanding.

Fierce Grey stopped sharply, ploughing up the snow with his legs. On the horse sat a young boy, an adolescent, with a long, unwieldy shepherd's cudgel.

A boy!.. The wolf had no fear of him.

Gnashing his teeth maliciously, Fierce Grey rushed to the side in order to bypass the little shepherd, and made his way towards the piteously bleating huddle of sheep. This bleating excited the wolf. Before him was an easy, fat kill, tender bones, an abundance of blood. But the boy dug his heels into the horse's flanks with all his might, raised the heavy, disobedient cudgel above his head, and fearlessly galloped straight towards the wolf.

Fierce Grey once again involuntarily turned away from the huddled flock. The boy shouted relentlessly. And something incomprehensible in the young boy's shouting tormented and frightened the wolf. The wolf ran, and the boy chased after it, not allowing it near the sheep. Raising himself up on the stirrups, brandishing the cudgel, he cried out at the top of his lungs:

"...ok...erek! ...ok...erek!"

The wolf gnashed its fangs and quickened its pace.

The boy was an agile rider and relentlessly goaded on the obedient horse, beating it with the cudgel, but he knew that the horse was lagging behind. Fierce Grey swept off and the boy swung the cudgel and flung it at him as if it were a spear.

It struck the wolf's bad leg with its rounded end and rolled along the icy ground, clattering and bouncing. Fierce Grey seized it furiously in his fangs and broke it instantly in two. Then he turned and, pinning back his ears, curling his lip as if smiling a ferocious wolf's smile, rushed silently at the boy. He leapt up and jerked at the hem of his sheepskin coat. The horse shied back with a terrified neigh, and the boy flew out of the saddle striking the back of his head against the ice-bound ground. His hat went flying from his head and rolling along the white slope.

The last thing the boy saw was the familiar wolf's ear, torn in a fight with dogs in those days when Fierce Grey still lived in the aul.

The boy was already dead when the wolf slashed his cheek with a curved fang.

During the night they picked up the boy's body and carried it to the aul where they laid it down by the hearth in the yurt.

Old Grandmother sat down at his feet.

"My poor lamb," Grandmother said over and over, "my poor lamb..."

And her weak-sighted eyes were unable to shed a single, relieving tear.

Then came the turn of the hunter Khasen, renowned in those parts, and his red and white borzoi.

Khasen had traded a horse for the hound in Semipalatinsk. On the hound's forehead was a small white patch with four proportionate rays, for which reason his master had named him White Star—Akkaska.

The borzoi was a thoroughbred, proud and hot-tempered. At feeding time he growled as he took his meat. At halting places Khasen would chain him up, as the hound would allow only his master to come near him. The aul mongrels kept out of his way and only barked at him from a distance. Akkaska paid them no attention, yawning lazily, and would lie for hours spread out motionless, his long muzzle resting on his paws. Only during a hunt did he come to life, easily outdistancing any horse, and his bark was resonant and terrifying. His eyes gleamed like those of a wolf, but not with a green, but a reddish fire, exactly like burning coals.

Khasen spent several days with the horse herders, studying the habits of Fierce Grey, asking questions about him. And all night long there were heated arguments by the campfiers about the solitary wolf which had killed Kurmash. But Khasen heard nothing that was new or surprising in their words.

Some said that the wolf was crazed. Some said that it wasn't a wolf at all, but a hyena. That was why it was so inconceivably voracious. Khasen did not believe the fables.

"It's a wolf," he said. "And you don't feed a wolf on hay!"

The horse herders swore and threatened:

"If only we could get our hands on him!"

Khasen chuckled:

"What will you do? Skin him alive?"

And only the bitter words of Kurmash's father stung Khasen to the quick. At his son's grave he had said to the hunter:

"You're an experienced fellow ... brave, stubborn... I know it's no easy

thing to overpower a werewolf. But if you don't put an end to him, know this—you're no kin of mine and no *djigit*, no one will have any use for you, and your dog won't worth a single kopeck. Don't show yourself around here again."

Khasen decided to get the herders together for a round-up, that was the only way they would be able to flush out the wolf. They needed no persuasion...

At dawn, before the hunt, Khasen did not give his hound any meat; he placed a bowl with a gruel of finely crumbled dry sheep's cheese in front of him. Akkaska ate quickly and kept his eyes fixed on his master. The intelligent animal understood: there would be a big, important hunt, a dangerous chase.

"Well, Akkaska," Khasen said, rumpling the hound's ear, "it's either you or him, there's no other way. The dead Kurmash will join us as the third..."

Akkaska looked attentively into his master's eyes, wagging his reddish tail impatiently.

They left for the steppe, and Khasen let the hound off the leash so that he could stretch his legs and get the blood flowing in his veins. With enormous bounds Akkaska raced across the snow tinged blue in the pale morning light.

Khasen separated the men into several groups and sent them in different directions. He himself took Akkaska and ascended to the rocky summit of a solitary hill exposed to the four winds. The hunters divided up the aul dogs and galloped off. Khasen spread out a large piece of felt between the sharp rocks, told Akkaska to lie down on it and himself lay down beside him in the snow, holding the hound by the collar.

Akkaska lay calmly beneath his master's hand, only his ears, like weathervanes, continually turned from side to side. From all directions came the muffled sounds of clamorous voices, the disorderly barking of the dogs, tossed about by the wind.

All of a sudden Akkaska raised himself up on his forelegs, no longer submitting to Khasen's hand, pricking his ears and peering in the direction of a quiet hollow. Now the hound resembled an eagle spying out its prey from its perch on a cliff. But for a long time yet the hollow remained deserted, while the men's shouts and dogs' barking seemed to have receded into the distance. It was unlikely that the beaters had spied the wolf—it stalked like an invisible grey phantom inside their ring of many miles. Akkaska crouched down in an unaccustomed way and lowered his head. Maybe he had been distracted by a hare? The borzoi liked to hunt hares.

No, Akkaska had not been mistaken. All of a sudden the wolf silently appeared in the spot where the hound had been watching for him—in the quiet, deserted, snowblanketed hollow. There he was—the cunning one! Here the snowdrifts

were soft and unstable. A horse following fresh tracks would flounder and get stuck up to its chest.

The wolf loped at a rapid but unhurried trot, looking round circumspectly, and Khasen, gripped with momentary doubt, bit his lower lip and cast a sideways glance at the hound. The grey wolf was huge and powerful and from a distance resembled a roan yearling colt with a wolf's snout. Indeed—a werewolf!

The wolf was upwind and didn't scent the hunter and borzoi. But Khasen knew that the wolf would never come close enough for a well-aimed shot and so he set loose his hound, saying: "Get time, boy!" while he himself ran for his horse which was tethered behind a cliff.

Fierce Grey sized up the build and power of the red and white borzoi at first glance. There would be no escaping it. The dog flew down the hill towards him with resonant, thundering baying; it was lean and twice as big as the skewbald hound. Behind it, between the rocks, as if between a camel's humps, he glimpsed a rider with a smooth black stick. The hunting party was all round. He must be quick!

The hound and the wolf collided on the snowy hillside, and the hound knocked the wolf off its feet and then lost its own balance and tumbled over. Both leapt up, locking their fangs, and parted with bloodied jaws, panting hoarsely. The wolf had met his match...

Several times Fierce Grey lunged at the hound and was met by heavy, well-aimed blows of its fangs. Still the wolf managed to position himself above the hound on the hillside and seized him just below the ear, as he had the pack leader early that winter. But Akkaska held his ground and tore himself free with a powerful shake of his head, leaving a piece of his skin and reddish fur in the wolf's mouth. Fierce Grey realized that this fight would not soon be over. And the rider was already galloping down the hill, shouting fervently:

"Hold on, hold on, boy! Akkaska-a!"

Fierce Grey gave a short yelp and lunged headlong at the hound.

Once again the wolf and hound locked their fangs so that sparks would have flown had it been dark. And here Akkaska, throwing caution aside, remembering only what his master had shouted, thrust his nose directly into the wolf's mouth and seized the beast in a death grip by the lower jaw.

Now they could not be parted: the hound gnawed at the wolf's jaw, and the wolf at the hound's, and neither could shake off the other.

Khasen galloped up. The horse danced beneath him, rearing. And Khasen's hands danced also. He tossed aside his rifle, jumped from the saddle, and also throwing caution to the wind, threw the whole weight of his body onto the stone-hard back of the wolf. He thrust a broad knife beneath his shoulder blade.

Akkaska freed his torn muzzle from the wolf's convulsively gnashing jaws

and walked off. He remained standing for a brief while and then fell down. Opposite him on his side lay Fierce Grey.

The other hunters began to ride up, and one of them poked his whip-handle between the wolf's teeth, opening its bloodied black mouth, and all were astonished at how large it was.

"Devil!.." said one, stepping back.

"Kokserek!" Khasen said, tenderly examining Akkaska's wounds.

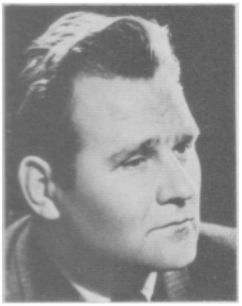
They carried the wolf's carcass into the aul and threw it beside Kurmash's yurt, and old Grandmother, just as Kurmash had done, recognized Fierce Grey by his tattered ear.

"Kokserek!" the old Grandmother cried, wringing her hands."Thrice accursed!.. How could you kill Kurmash, bloodsucker!"

And with her weak leg she kicked the wolf in its gaping jaw.

VYTAUTAS PETKEVIČIUS

(b. 1930)



Soviet Lithuanian writer Vytautas Petkevičius was born in the city of Kaunas. In 1949, he graduated from high school and began to conduct Komsomol work in Kaunas and Siauliai. He studied at the Advanced Komsomol School in Moscow, then worked at the CC of the Lithuaninan YCL. He was Secretary of the District Party Committee, then became a correspondent for one of the republic's major newspapers. In 1960, he graduated from the correspondence division of the History Department of Moscow State University, then was appointed a prose consultant for the Lithuanian Writers' Union and did some work at the Lithuanian Film Studios for a while.

Petkevičius first appeared in print in 1955. He writes about Lithuanian history, the revolutionary movement, the activities of the partizans during World War II, and the Komsomol's struggle against nationalist bands. His publications include the novels *People from the Suburbs* (1959), *Bread, Love and a Rifle* (1967), and *Clay Motejus, King of Men* (1978), and the collections of short stories *Freezing Springs* (1965) and *White Shadow* (1970). Petkevičius's children's stories are full of adventure and folk wisdom, fantasy, and humor. Among his better known children's pieces are the novellas *The Adventure of the Acorn* (1964), *Why Are the Cranes Crying?* (1963), *Arshin, Son of Vershok* (1966), *Mikas Pupkus, the Great Hunter* (1959), the fairy tale *What the Rye Says* (1973), and the book of essays *My Native Land Is Called Lithuania* (1975). Many of Petkevičius's works have been adapted for stage and screen.

Nor has Petkevičius neglected the theatre. The play *Struggle* (1967), based on a series of short stories by the author, was produced by the Vilnius Television Theatre, and the Panevežis Drama Theatre presented the tragicomedy *The Wagon's Fifth Wheel* (1976) and the drama *The Singing Mound* (1977). His writings have been translated into the languages of the USSR and foreign languages as well.

Vytautas Petkevičius

My Place Under the Sun

MY PLACE UNDER THE SUN...*

In Lithuania, Kaunas is second only to Vilnius, the republic's capital, in size and importance. It stands at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers, and not far from the city, the Jiesia, Šeimena, Girstupis, and Vyčius rivers flow into the Nemunas. The city is surrounded by green valleys, flowery meadows, shady ravines overgrown with hazel, white sandbars, and bluish forests. Among the ringing pine forests and quiet ravines were tucked away nine old citadels and several dozen guard posts.

All approaches to the city, are ringed by pleasant suburbs connected by intricate labyrinths of streets and alleys, broken here and there by the dark stones of fortress walls.

No other Lithuanian city has such interesting surroundings, such a mass of pleasant nooks which awake flights of fantasy and daydreams galore. There is the charming valley of Adam Mickiewicz, the marvelous groves of Jiesia and Panemune, the lovely Freda, unique Ažuolynas—the ancient oak grove and hills of Aleksotas, the sand beaches of Šančiai and the islands in the Nemunas...

FIRST MEMORIES

Kaunas is my home. Here, my childhood passed, and my friends and I combed the underground passages beneath the citadels in search of bats. We dived from the slopes into freezing river pools. It was here that I first began to work: rafting down the Nemunas with the grown-ups. It was here that I first set out to learn about my native parts and wound up getting lost in the forest... I did many things here for the first time, so of course, what later became commonplace seemed unusual and even extraordinary at the time.

The first sparks of consciousness emerged, after the initial period of nothingness. My earliest memory, which signified that I was alive...

"Mama, do you remember the time you were crying, and Daddy was crying, and lots of people all around us were crying, too?.. When was that?"

"You couldn't possibly remember that. You were too little."

"But I do remember it. I was sitting on Daddy's shoulders, and you were crying and pale. You wiped your tears with the corner of your kerchief. The one with the green polka dots. Daddy was crying, too, and he covered his face with his cap. The people all around us were crying, too."

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

"But you were only three years old then!"

"So what? I still remember it all clear as a bell..."

...An enormous crowd had gathered at the Kaunas airport. There was a sea of heads all around me, and nothing else was visible. A heaving sea of heads. I was sitting on my father's shoulders. He held my legs tight and asked me:

"Well, can you see anything?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Well, as soon as you do, tell me."

"O. K."

Then all the people started crying. Everywhere, all around. I was terrified. More terrified than I had ever been. The tears and the terror impressed it all upon my memory down to the minutest detail: Mother's polka-dot kerchief and her words: "Cry, my little son, cry!"

Father was ashamed of his tears and covered his face with his cap. But his shoulders trembled, revealing his emotions...

Much later, when I was already a big boy, I remembered those tears and asked Father:

"Why were you crying like a little child?"

"It's hard to be a small people on this earth. Look what happened when some of our boys tried to act big: the Germans shot them down like dogs."

On July 17, 1933, the people of Kaunas gathered at the airport to meet two of their fellow Lithuanians who had made a transatlantic crossing. Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas, two bold aviators, had used their own resources and funds donated by Lithuanians living abroad to buy an old airplane and refit it for the long and hazardous flight. Their craft, the *Lithuanika,* took off secretly from New York on the night of July 15th, without the permission of the government and headed for Kaunas. They hadn't had the money to buy a radio or navigational equipment. All they had was a compass, but they managed to stay right on course. They reached the coast of Scotland on July 16th, and their fellow countrymen began making preparations to meet them, but the next night, their plane crashed over Eastern Prussia in a forest not far from a Nazi concentration camp. Both pilots were killed. The cause of their death remained unknown, but everyone in Kaunas was sure they had been shot down by the camp guards.

They had flown 6,411 kilometers nonstop in 35 hours 15 minutes, and a mere 650 kilometers remained to Kaunas...

So the crowd at the airport burst into tears...

Steponas Darius and Stasys Girenas had taken second place in nonstop flying time after American aviator Charles Lindbergh. Even today, the pieces of the aircraft and personal belongings are on display in the Kaunas historical museum

as a testimony to the courage, self-sacrifice, and persistence of those two sons of Lithuania, and as proof that they are equal to the famous sons of other, larger peoples.

THE STRIKE

After the memory of the airport, my mind draws a blank. It was as if I ceased to exist. Only a year or two later do I remember the massacre by the factory gates...

...Mother and I were taking Father his lunch. Suddenly, we found ourselves in the thick of the fighting: mounted police galloped up the street, and cobblestones began to fly. The horses reared, whips cracked and sabers flashed. Blood flowed...

Mother and I took cover in a gate-way.

A fire engine drove up with its siren wailing and the firemen trained their hoses on the crowd. I started laughing, but stopped short when I noticed my mother following the course of events with her hands clasped to her breast and frightened eyes. The crowd began to drive back the police, and the firemen made a hasty departure. The people swarmed all over the fire engine and toppled it over on its side as if it were a toy. Now Mama started laughing.

They had done that to an enormous fire engine! A real fire engine! That powerful monster which sowed fear into the hearts of one and all as it tore down the streets with full water tanks...

No, something wasn't right...

When everything had calmed down and we left our hiding place, I even went over and touched the fire engine. It was real, and the water dripping from the tanks was real, and the wheels were far from a figment of my imagination...

And thus, I got my first taste of the power of the working man. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, they had turned this enormous fire engine upside down like a tiny bug.

Only later did I learn that the name of this tremendous power is solidarity. A lot of water passed under the bridge before I comprehended the full meaning of that word. First I had to go hungry time and again and care for Father whose back was striped with red welts made by the sheath of a policeman's saber. I had to see the poverty and afflictions of our neighbors and experience want in plenty myself...

We shall renounce the old world...

My father sang about the world around me which seemed to have appeared

only yesterday or the day before... He sang about a world of which I had not the slightest idea. Later it became clear to me that workers' solidarity did not emerge at a wave of a wand. The revolutionary traditions of the factory where my father worked had been initiated in 1897 by the metal workers who were the first men ever to strike in Kaunas. It was then that Felix Dzerzhinsky created an underground organization for workers and began to put out the first proletarian newspaper in the region, the *Kaunas Worker.* More than 20,000 workers took to the streets of Kaunas in the revolutionary year of 1905.

The revolutionary traditions spread quickly and took firm hold in this city which the Czar's generals turned into an impregnable citadel where for decades, fortifications were erected and shored up. The garrison was 55,000 strong. In the city proper, the commandant did not allow the construction of buildings over two storeys high for fear the view of the surrounding areas might be obstructed for the artillerymen. In times of war and peace alike, the civilian population was regarded as an unreliable element, and every spark of free thinking was stamped out with all the severity which could be mustered by the court-martial. Kaunas was an armed camp from which any free-thinking individual would be banished with all due haste.

But nothing could help the authorities: all the same, Kaunas was one of the centers of the underground revolutionary movement in Lithuania. And after the White Poles seized Vilnius and the capital was temporarily moved to Kaunas, the underground CC of the Communist Party and Komsomol moved to our city as well.

Here in Kaunas, underground newspapers and pamphlets were published, and here, the younger generation gained strength for the coming fight for freedom and happiness.

FOUR COMMUNARDS

A gravel road meanders through the Žaliakalnis Hills in one of the regions of Kaunas and to the fortress walls. I was following a big wagon with two stones in my hands, and as soon as the horse stopped, I put the stones under the wheels to keep the wagon from rolling down the hill. Our old bay relaxed her muscles and rested a while, then, at my uncle's command, she again began to pull at the traces and the cart rolled slowly uphill.

"Come on, old girl, just a little bit farther! Atta girl!"

Finally, we reached the top, and my uncle continued to walk beside the horse, but he let me clamber into the cart atop an enormous box of fragrant sawdust that was still warm. The pungent aroma of the wood made me dizzy. The wheels rattled on, but I was sitting high atop the soft sawdust and could

see everything for miles around. Beyond the turn, we came upon a barrier of three rows of barbed wire, a fence, and massive iron gates with casemates dug into the earth. Armed soldiers marched along the perimeter.

"What's that?" I asked my uncle.

"The sixth fort."

"Why are they guarding it?"

"Because it's a prison. We call the chief warden the Axe, and his assistants, the butchers. If you only knew what cold-hearted bastards they are. I was in there, too; I ate their prison bread for a week and watered their garden with a holey bucket. Some garden they've thought up. They made some of the men plant stones and others water them..."

I looked at that horrible structure with eyes full of terror and was afraid to twitch. But finally, curiosity overcame fear, and I asked:

"Why did they put you in prison?"

"I wouldn't give in to those rotters; I had a mind of my own. And I'm on the side of justice. It's a strange thing: justice doesn't weigh anything, and you can't see it. Like it isn't there at all. But once you pick it up, it gets heavier and heavier. Even heavier than the cart our poor old bay pulled up the hill."

The road sloped down again, and it was time for me to jump down from the wagon and be about my business. We reached the deep moat that surrounded the fortress. I put the stones under the wheels to give the horse a rest, because the descent would be even harder on her than the ascent had been. My uncle looked around unhurriedly, then he took off his cap and stared to one side. I was surprised at this, because he didn't seem hot, and his brow wasn't sweaty. We weren't in church for him to be baring his head. But just then, he poked me in the side and I hurriedly snatched off my cap as well.

We stood there in silence for a bit, then moved on. The bay strained to keep the cart from rolling down the steep downward grade. My uncle held onto the reins, and I dragged along behind the cart with my stones.

"Why did we take our caps off, Uncle?"

"To honor the memory of the dead."

"But there aren't any dead people there. It's not a cemetery; it's just a bare field."

"Do you see over there by the turn where the fortress rampart is overgrown with blackthorn?"

"Yes."

"Four communards were shot there and thrown into a pit. They didn't even bother digging graves for them."

I didn't know what a communard was, but I understood quite well that the Axe and his butchers had carried out some vile deed.

In 1940, when Soviet government was restored in Lithuania, everyone in our parts learned of the heroic death of the four revolutionaries.

In December 1926, a fascist coup was carried out in Lithuania. The fascists' first blows were aimed against the communists. The police arrested the Secretary of the underground Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania Karolis Požela, members of the CC Bureau Kazys Giedrys and Juozas Greifenbergeris, and member of the underground Bureau of the CC of the Komsomol Rapolas Carnas. The four prisoners were accused of treason and condemned to death. The communists refused to plead for mercy. The day after Christmas, they were shot near the moat of the sixth fort by the fortress wall. The working people of Lithuania learned of the loss of these staunch revolutionaries and bowed their bared heads in grief. Even today, people bow their heads in the face of their bravery, staunchness, and dedication to the cause of the Revolution. Now the words "the four communards" ring out in Lithuania as symbols of staunchness and courage.

"Comrades," Karolis Požela wrote before his death, "I have worked as long and hard as I could, and now I am dying for our common cause. I hope that you will work and struggle ceaselessly until the victory is ours!"

THE LITHUANIAN AKU-AKU

For many centuries a quiet village stood on the ancient mound of Žvaginis in Žemaitija. For hundreds of years, simple and hard-working people lived and labored here. They farmed, grew grain, and pastured their bay horses in the green meadows above the little Žvelsa River. Their merry songs and colorful calicoes were a joy to behold. The folk there looked after the little ones, taught the teenagers how to do farm work, made a living by the sweat of their brow, told their grandchildren tales that had been passed down from generation to generation, and finally, were laid to their eternal rest in the shady village cemetery.

Thus, life continued over the centuries, and it would have been the same there today and tomorrow and for many years to come. It is unlikely that very many Lithuanians would know about the quiet, absolutely ordinary village of Ablinga in the charming region of Žemaitija.

If not for the war, they would never have heard of it...

...The sun wasn't up yet when the shots rang out and the racket of exploding shells and bombs filled the air. The frightened people took cover in the ravines left by torrential spring rains on the slopes of the mound. It was as though a monstrous storm raged above them as the first line of the front rolled over them

and moved to the East. The bodies of a few Germans killed in battle by the retreating Soviet troops and local activists were left scattered about. Such is the law of war: the men defended their homes against the invaders and struggled for honor and freedom. They retreated only in the face of an onslaught of superior forces.

The firing ceased, and quiet reigned. The people returned to their homes and went about their business.

But the next day, on the morning of June 23rd, a punitive expedition arrived in Ablinga. The nazis rounded up the innocent, peaceful civilian population into the wooden shed which had formerly been a store; they slaughtered all the animals, looted and burned houses, killing at random, sparing no one...

At sunset, everyone who had been seized was thrown into a large pit and ordered to lie down. The soldiers began to shoot.

Only ashes floating on the breeze remained of Ablinga. Several heavily wounded women survived along with a five-month-old girl, Ioanna, who was pulled from under the pile of corpses, with her hand shot through by a fascist bullet.

And thus, on the second day of the war, the first Lithuanian village which offered resistance to the nazi invaders was destroyed, and forty of its residents—men and women, teenagers and children, old people and tiny babies—were murdered in cold blood...

The front moved farther and farther east, and news came of even more horrible deeds—atrocities on a much larger scale—committed by the nazis. There were so many and they were so terrible that the tragedy of Ablinga became but a tiny droplet drowning in the monstrous stream of tears and blood. After the war ended, the names of Lidicė and Oradour, Pirčiupis and Khatyn, Warsaw and Coventry were much better known than that of Ablinga. They were lamented more loudly than the tiny, quiet Lithuanian village...

But then, thirty-one years after the tragic end of Ablinga, the name of this village was spoken all over Lithuania once more. On the initiative of sculptor and local lore specialist Vytautas Majoras, in the summer of 1971, a studio for folk atrists was set up at one of the estates in the village of Žvaginiai. From all over the republic the best known and most respected folk artists came to raise Ablinga from the ashes. Thirty of the most talented wood carvers of Lithuania took part in the project, along with master blacksmiths, a specialist in prints, and a superb carpenter. When they had all gathered together, a piece of work the likes of which has never before been seen was created.

Vytautas Majoras had given the project a lot of thought and had painstakingly gathered the necessary material. He had talked with the witnesses to the tragedy who remained alive and with residents of neighboring villages who were relatives

of the people who had died in Ablinga. In the end, he managed to piece together the biography of every person who had perished there: age, character, likes, and dislikes. He acquainted his friends with this moving evidence. Each decided to whom he would dedicate his sculpture; they divided up the enormous oak trunks brought from nearby forests and set to work.

They worked for a whole month on these monuments-in-wood to the innocent victims of nazi aggression. They worked with inspiration and dedication. Millimeter by millimeter, shaving after shaving, stroke by stroke, the sculptures emerged: each artist recreated according to the dictates of his imagination the appearance and character of his subject who had died so tragically thirty-one years before. Then, on June 29, 1971, they put on their best suits and gathered for the solemn ceremonial opening of the memorial. And when they saw the overall picture, they were amazed to see that their work had such an uncommonly striking effect.

People came from all over Lithuania to honor the memory of the fallen: they bowed before this monument to the people, which had been erected by the people themselves. When the white coverings were removed from the sculptures, a new, resurrected Ablinga came into view: it was stern and accusing, simple and majestic, mighty and eternal as the giant oaks that grow in our native land...

They were inseparable, they were, Petras, merry and open-hearted, and the laconic dreamer Antanas. They loved good books and fine horses and went everywhere together. Nor were they separated at their last moment, for they were bound together and burned to death by the nazis. And now the two friends have been sculpted, inseparable as twin oaks growing from a single root. They gaze in austere grief at the site of their village with eyes that seem to ask: "Why?"

Nearby, another ploughman of Ablinga stands at full height: Leonas Dausynas' hands firmly grasp the handles of his plough.

Not far away, his neighbor Marcele Žebrauskienė is frozen in eternal flight. In mortal fear, she presses six-year-old Aldute to her breast and grasps the hand of her nine-year-old daughter Janytė... That is how they were seen in the final moments of their lives: a half-dressed woman in a torn nightgown running across the flowering meadow, trying to get farther away from the pit in the hope of saving her children from the nazi bullets, but in vain. And thus they have been carved in wood: the children clinging to their mother in terror as she attempts to shield them from death. This restrained but highly expressive sculptural group is a monument to all the families that perished in the war and serves as a reminder to anyone who has forgotten what fascism is.

...Hard-working sower Juozas Žebrauskas was a kindly, outgoing fellow. He was forever making people laugh with the harmless jokes he made up, and

they sang the ditties he made up as they worked in the fields... Now this sower and ploughman stands firm on his native soil, the incarnation of the ancient Lithuanian legend that after death, every ploughman turns into a tree which watches over the living.

...As on that day, blacksmith Jonas Beniušis from the village of Kartena stands in his wedding finery next to his bride, village seamstress Basia Luožytė. They are crowned by a common garland of rue, the yellow flowers of which are beloved by Lithuanians and regarded as the symbol of their land. Not far away, paralyzed with shock, wearing the traditional festive ribbon, matchmaker Kazimieras Barbšys stands rooted to the earth. Custom demanded that the matchmaker justify himself before those who had gathered for the wedding, and he would have done so this time as well, but his face is filled with torment rather than slyness: he sought to join this pair for life, not death! Nearby stands Basia's father, the best musician in the village, to whom fate meted out the cruel punishment of seeing his children mowed down at the joyful hour they were to be united in matrimony. The old man is stooping under the weight of his grief.

A young woman with her festive ribbon raised high in the air looks tenderly and sadly into the distance. The figure of her husband has been carved from the same trunk. Thus has been depicted the tragic fate of two young families, the Jonukases and the Martinkuses, who were both expecting their first child, but didn't live to see the day.

It is difficult to tear one's eyes from the carving of the young girl Srėbaliūtė, which has been executed in an unsophisticated, slightly naive manner. Above her hovers the bird of terror, the gloomy nazi eagle, about to sink its talons into her head. These two figures, the innocent girl and the bird of prey, merge into an obelisk of penetrating grief and pain.

When one looks at the carvings of this memorial, it seems that life goes on uninterrupted in Ablinga... The war has ended, and the victorious men have returned home to work in the fields. Seventeen-year-old Baltonite has gone for a walk in the flowering meadow. Her little sister is standing next to her in the fragrant clover. They wear headdresses with an ancient design in which wild, pagan hops reach out for the sun. Looking at the setting sun are old forester Petras Mikalauskas, flanked by the seemingly alive figures of Paulina Žebrauskaite, Andrius Baltuonis, and Antanas Luožys. But a cloud hides the sun and a shadow falls upon the slope of the hill. The lifelike feeling created by the carvings dissipates at once.

A person walks up to one of the figures and lays a wreath or a bouquet or a bunch of wild flowers at the base of the statue and mutters something. Forever will remain with him this thought of death and life, of non-existence conquered; for the people are deathless, and that is the meaning of these thirty

monuments to the simple farmers who have been transformed into mighty chunks of oak and now stand guard over the green slope of the hill that was once their home.

I can walk for hours along the slope of this hill past the Ablingans who have been resurrected in these monuments, gazing at the wood carvings, and I am certain no kind of fascism can conquer or enslave such people. Nothing can wipe them from the face of the earth.

Years pass, generations come and go, but forever more these Lithuanian Aku-Akus will tell anyone who comes here of our difficult past which has given way to a new, bright present. They are manifestations of the folk art traditions resurrected by socialist reality. The art of wood carving, as ancient as our people, has been moved from the small workshops, private collections, souvenir shops to crossroads, to hilltops drenched with the blood of our people, to the sites of pitched battles against counter-revolutionaries, invaders, and nazis.

THE WAR

In the garden of the Kaunas Historical Museum, in front of the wall holding the urns with the ashes of those brave revolutionaries, the Four Communards, stands a tall bell tower. At the top of it flies the flag of the republic—red, white, and green. Thrice daily, chimes the music to:

A new dawn is breaking
Over the Nemunas...

Thirty-five bells, large and small, hang at various heights in the tower. Not only do they chime the hours, but many melodies can be played on them. On holidays or fine evenings, Victoras or Giedrius Cuprevičius, the composers, climbs the stairs of the tower and the marvelous music of the bells rings out over the city.

It floats out over the valleys, awakening fearful memories...

...The whole evening, we were getting ready for the next day's visit to the theater, so we were up late ironing, cleaning, and preening ourselves. Moreover, the night was stuffy and seemed filled with alarming forebodings. Suddenly our whole suburb seemed to soar upward, and the rooftops were shaken by waves of explosions.

Again and again came the shock waves... They were so severe they knocked many of the tiny houses in the working-class suburb from their foundations. Everything was in flames as the warehouses filled with shells exploded and blazed, machine guns rattled, antiaircraft guns barked, and German planes

roared over the confused, terrified city which had been woken from a sound sleep. The sun rose in thick clouds of black smoke. Somewhere in the city, near the Nemunas, a church bell began to ring. Through the rumble of explosions, the rattle of machine-gun fire, the black smoke, and screams of terror came the dull bonging of this bell.

At sunrise of that short summer night, the first bombs were dropped on Kaunas. World War II began for us. Two days later, the Germans entered the city.

Where were our men?

Why had they deserted us?

More fires and explosions, more despair, and again, the heartrending question: "What will happen next?"

The first steps of those iron-heeled boots on Lithuanian soil brought with them the blackest days in the history of Kaunas. In the casemates of the old forts where we had hunted for bats as boys, people were being killed—tens of thousands. The invaders occupied the best buildings and schools, burst into apartments and drove the innocent residents out, and kept on shooting, shooting, shooting...

Would this go on forever?

One could lose one's mind from terror and hopelessness! The Germans were at the approaches to Moscow!

My father and older sister, who was a Komsomol member had to go into hiding again. We studied in four shifts at school and traded our best clothes for food...

...We climbed up the hill along a winding road talking loudly about recent happenings. We caught up with a friend who was pulling along a small cart filled with cabbages. A column of prisoners appeared from around the bend at that moment. They were thin and exhausted. Young Germans with swastikas on their sleeves marched along beside the column.

"Give them something to eat," suggested one of the guards, a painfully neat German who looked as if he had just stepped out of a painting.

But we hesitated.

"Go ahead. What are you afraid of?"

We saw the prisoners shaking their heads no and didn't dare to approach them. We didn't trust the German.

Then, suddenly, Stasys Tamošiunas grabbed a head of cabbage, thrust it into the hand of the nearest prisoner, and jumped back. The Hun who had just provoked us took his rifle from his shoulder, clicked the lock, and before all us children, shot Stasys in the chest right there in broad daylight. We froze in terror. When our hearts started beating again, we scattered in all directions like frightened sparrows... When we finally crawled out of the bushes, the place

was deserted except for the lone motionless body of the boy on the shoulder of the road.

Thus the first boy from our suburb was killed. We carried him home on the cart, and our eyes blinded by tears. Our hearts were bursting with grief. Some unwelcome stranger, some vile little fascist bastard who didn't even think we were human had come to our native land and killed a boy just for the fun of it! And yet there were so many grown men around—so many people—but all unarmed!.. They all slinked around with their heads hung low, afraid to look each other in the eye...

JANINA

I couldn't put Stasys's death out of my mind for a long time. I dreamed about him; I saw him whenever I passed near the terrible place where he had been killed. I saw him when I was reading. And though I thought hard, I could not understand why the grown-ups were such cowards. Why were they so slavish in the face of their enemy? Where was the force that could resist the invaders?

...Our turn came at last. One day, the Germans surrounded our school. Some of the older pupils jumped out the third floor windows, but they were caught and shoved into the waiting vans. The soldiers pillaged the office and smashed the chemistry lab to bits. They arrested our principal.

The next day, the school and the whole suburb was buzzing with the news:

"Janina Čižinauskaitė... Who would have thought it!.. She had established radio contact with Moscow, and the Germans were scared to death of her!.."

I had seen her many times but never even said hello to her. She was just a slip of a girl, even though she was a few grades ahead of me. And I was a man, even if I was only twelve! I knew she was a friend of my sister's and lived nearby. I could even point out the house. I had seen her on her way to school, but she didn't carry a book bag. She had seemed cheerful enough: always laughing and smiling even where she should have been more serious. She looked so fragile... A young girl, in short, and then it turned out she was a partizan!

I was ashamed: after all, there were so many grown men and boys at the school. We had a whole bunch of arms hidden in a hollow tree not far from the highway... And we had taken an oath... Then, all of a sudden, it turned out that a seventeen-year-old girl was the Secretary of the underground YCL organization. She had typed and pasted leaflets, established contact with the partizans, collected food and clothing for escaped prisoners, revenged the deaths of three communist partizans, burned down two sawmills, and thrown grenades into the nazis' barracks.

But her letters to her mother from prison were again those of a young girl: she wrote that she didn't want for anything, and that everything was all right. It was as if she were writing home from a health resort, as if the merciless war and killing were not a part of her life. Her mother showed those letters to everyone, hoping and waiting all the while. She waited and waited until at last she learned that her daughter's life had been cut short by a bullet in the terrible Ninth Fort.

Every beginning is difficult, and people seemed to take Janina as their example. After her arrest, it was a rare day that there wasn't some news in the city of a train that had been derailed, a building set on fire, something blown up, or a German found dead... Now, ahead of every trainload of military supplies, the Germans would send cars laden with gravel in case there were mines. And no longer did the invaders dash fearlessly about: they moved cautiously and slowly for fear of sudden attacks.

Even I had a tale to tell. I caught a ride on a German supply train filled with foodstuffs after trading some nails for fat back in the country. It hit a mine, and we all got shaken up quite a bit. Even though I was scared to death, I gazed with pleasure at the gaping hole, the bent rails, and the overturned cars. The railway embankment was yellow with broken eggs, butter and sour cream. So the farm products requisitioned from Lithuanian villages never saw the inside of those fancy stores with big signs reading: "Germans Only"!

Soldiers milled about the train senselessly shooting into the air, but they didn't find anyone or anything except a fine string that ran from the black hole made by the exploding mine to a dense stand of bushes on the embankment. That was all. It looked as if the string had been left by someone who had been flying a kite.

THE PARTIZANS

By the end of the occupation, I already had secrets of my own. Gudauskas the tailor sewed winter clothing for the underground. Since I was tall for my age, he fitted the coats on me. The first one was intended for our neighbor Povilas Štaras, Secretary of the underground Komsomol committee of Kaunas and the whole district. He was a kind, good-hearted fellow who reminded me of Janina somehow. He wouldn't hurt a fly, or so it seemed, but there were legends about his partizan group going round the city.

When the Germans who were looking for Povilas burst into his parents' house one day and then came next door to ours, I stood by the wall with my hands up, and I wasn't afraid of anything. "Aha!" I thought. "You're not as

strong as you think you are! You're afraid after all! You're just rushing around grabbing the first people you come across, and you probably don't know anything about the guy you're looking for. But I know! And I'll never tell you anything, no matter what you do to me!"

In the end, perhaps it was better that they didn't ask me anything.

After the war, my neighbor, now a scholar and historian, Dr. Povilas Štaras told us how he was parachuted into the enemy's rear and couldn't find his supply kit in the forest. How could he make it through the winter without a warm coat?..

"How careless we were on occasion," he remarked with belated consternation. "But on the other hand, we had to rely on the local people for help anyway..."

Every honest man supported the partizans. Komsomol organizations were formed in various regions of Kaunas—in Žaliakalnis, Murava, Šančiai, and Freda; Komsomol members maintained contacts with the Adam Mickiewicz partizan detachment, and the Death to the Invaders organization. They listened to short-wave broadcasts from the Voice of Truth, blew up enemy supply trains, and pasted up leaflets...

...Early one cold morning, I ran to the bazaar in Šančiai to buy some bread, but at that moment, several trucks full of soldiers drove up.

"It's a round-up!" the shout rang out, and people scattered, taking cover wherever they could.

However, that time, the Germans weren't the least bit interested in any of us. They surrounded an entire block of Siūlu Street with a solid ring of soldiers. Rounds of automatic fire were heard. A fire engine rushed along like a hurricane, its sirens wailing.

In the attic of a small wooden house, the wounded Alfonsas Čeponis, member of the Kaunas underground Komsomol committee, was shooting it out with the enemy. One man against a whole gang! The shots rang out for five hours. Čeponis saved the last bullet for himself.

I knew him personally. We had met many times, and it occasionally happened that I was the recipient of a friendly punch. I also knew Lionginas Vekerotas, who carried out quite a few acts of sabotage at the railway station. They were a merry, lively, and exceedingly brave bunch. I remember how once, before the war, they organized a swimming contest down at the river: not a regular one, but with stones tied around their necks. We children and the rest of the observers were rolling with laughter. I also remember a skating competition they held: the course was a long, steep icy slope on one of the hills. Lionginas dislocated his leg that time, and Alfonsas and his other friends carried him carefully home in a seat of interlocked arms.

But all these memories are eclipsed by the heroic fight when he held out

for five hours against a whole company of nazis. It would seem that it was all over: the firing from the wooden house had ceased. I clenched my fists in helpless despair, regretting through my tears that I had been born too late to be of much help. If only I had been three or four years older! The policemen hiding behind the trees and fences dashed closer to the house and took cover, but again, shots rang out from within, and my heart beat faster. I was afraid to feel joy, afraid to try to guess what would happen next. All I could do was wait and wait. Everything around was still except for the movement of the figures in those accursed uniforms. Quiet, more shooting, then a deathly quiet would descend once more...

It was a long five hours!

Fifteen years later, the archives of the Kaunas Gestapo were found in Poland, and we learned the full record of the heroic deeds of our Komsomol. Leafing through these documents, I never cease to wonder at the bravery of these young people, at their love for their homeland. Such love cannot be taught in any school; no one can command people to love their native land so. I imagine heroes are born, not made!

In 1959, Alfonsas Čeponis and his comrades-in-struggle Juozas Aleksonis and Gubertas Boris were posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

PIRČIUPIS

Towards the end of the occupation, the nazis stepped up their frenzied attempts to crush the growing resistance. In Lithuania alone, the partizans derailed 577 military supply trains, put over 400 locomotives out of commission, destroyed about 3,000 railway cars, blew up 125 bridges and 48 barracks, and liquidated about fifteen thousand nazi soldiers.

The Germans began to retreat.

On June 3, 1944, in the Rūdninkų Forest, near the village of Pirčiupis the partizans fired on cars of fascists. Several were killed. The rest managed to get away and reached the town of Eišiškės. From there, they returned to Pirčiupis, not alone, but with a contingent of butchers from the 9th and 10th Companies of the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Regiment of the SS. The punitive expedition was led by Regimental Commander Titel himself. The nazis surrounded Pirčiupis and burned 119 people alive: 69 children and babies, 29 women and old people, and 21 men. With what could these innocent people defend themselves from the butchers? Tears and prayers didn't help them. They were all rounded up into several sheds and locked in. The sheds were set afire. The nazis took six women with them to Eišiškės for interrogation. They were released with instruc-

tions to find the partizans and tell them that such a fate awaited all who attempted to defy the Reich...

Now on that spot stands a sculpture by Gedimines Jokubonis of the Mother of Pirčiupis, and many come to pay homage to her. A new village has risen on the site of the one burned to the ground by the nazis, and a museum has been opened. It was built by a local collective farm. All around it is quiet and peaceful, but I find it difficult to pass by the spot without a shudder.

The village that stood here is no more.
It was burned to the ground,
And all within–
Who ever were
Or might have been–
They also perished by that flame
In the village that was but is no more.

With these words poet Justinas Marcinkevičius begins his tale of the tragedy of Pirčiupis. His poem "Blood and Ashes" is no less impressive a memorial to the victims of fascism than the sculpture of the Mother. It is also a warning to those living now that such tragedies must never be repeated.

...One day after the war had ended, I was wandering about my native Važatkiemis, which is not far from the quiet little town of Prienai, and I saw a farmer standing by a field of rye which had been damaged by hail. He was completely motionless, like a living monument, the personification of grief. Even now, I can see that sorrowful figure before me in his worn clothing and worn boots. I can see how he looked with tormented eyes at the hailstones the size of cherries melting in his hand. Yet another misfortune had hit this land upon which the invaders had wrought such massive destruction: the grain had been beaten to the ground. The icy cold brought to earth in the form of hailstones pierced the heart. The man's voice was trembling: he couldn't speak. There was no one upon whom he could pour out his wrath.

"Idiot that I am, I spent the whole day digging a ditch..." he finally managed to say.

He headed for home, slowly placing one foot in front of the other, dragging his hoe in a hand drained of all strength. It seemed he had also been flattened into the black mud by the ruthless hail. Down his cheeks rolled not warm tears but hailstones the size of cherries...

I was filled then with a passionate desire to become all-powerful and wise. I wanted desperately to help that man in his hour of need, or to spread out my arms and fall upon the earth to shelter it, the crops, and the farmers themselves from such great misfortunes and torments.

I am filled with such a desire even now when I read Justinas Marcinkevičius' poems "The Wall" and "Donelaitis", or when I watch his dramas *Mindaugas* and *The Cathedral.* I long for the constraint of that farmer: I want to stand next to the Mother of Pirčiupis as Marcinkevičius can, silently taking the grief of my land upon my own feeble shoulders. I want to turn into a gray stone in a field and absorb all the sorrow borne by our land. I want to bear it all myself and not let this sorrow touch another living soul.

Another of Marcinkevičius' sagacious lines probably has its roots in just such ruminations:

Poets are born of the Earth...

YANKA BRYL

(b. 1917)

Soviet Byelorussian writer Ivan Bryl, who uses the pen-name Yanka Bryl, was born into the family of a railway worker in Odessa. In 1922, the family returned to the village of Zagorye in Western Byelorussia. It was here that the author's childhood and youth passed. This winsome shepherd boy became a soldier and fought against Hitler's invading forces at Gdynia as a marine. In September 1939, after the defeat of the Gdynia port, he was taken prisoner by the Germans, but managed to escape in August 1941. He became a partizan liaison man, then joined the Komsomolets Reconnaissance Brigade of the Baranovichi grouping and worked for the underground partizan press. His first poems and stories were composed early in his youth, but he won real popularity only after the war when his novella *Sunrise Beyond the Swamp* was published. The tense, action-packed plot of the work paints a convincing picture of the class struggle in Western Byelorussia. His 1954 novella, *On the Bystryanka River,* touchingly depicts the purity of heart and concern for progress of Soviet young people. Bryl's writing is filled with humour and realistic detail which enable him to portray the inner world of his characters vividly. The novel *Birds and Nests* (1963) is rich in details from the author's past. Though the main theme is the war, it seldom appears in the novel as such.

Among Bryl's many stories and novellas for children are *Green School* (1951), *The Beginning of Maturity* (1957), and *Once Upon a Time There Was a Little Hedgehog* (1976). The bulk of Bryl's fiction was collected into the volume *I'm Going Home* (1975). The dominant sentiment of this volume is not so much hatred of evil as regrets that it still has the power to dominate people. Bryl is a humanistic writer whose prose is filled with lyricism. His protagonists are ordinary people who are noble in thought and deed.

Over the course of several years, from 1970 to 1973, Yanka Bryl travelled to thirty-five regions of Byelorussia and visited 147 villages along with writers Ales Adamovich and Vladimir Kolesnik. Thus their joint publication in memory of their fellow countrymen who died at the hands of the nazi invaders came into being. This book, *Out of the Fire,* is a resounding condemnation of fascism and the evils it spawned. Bryl's books have been translated into many languages, and the author himself has done many translations.

Yanka Bryl All in the Course of a Day

ALL IN THE COURSE OF A DAY*

1

Until Lida Svirid met the three partizans in the dense virgin forest, it had seemed to the young woman that everything all around was dead.

Absolutely everything, starting with her house in the village—her little nest. And a poor nest it had been since they had killed Andrei. Though the cupboards were bare, a nest it was, for their baby bird, their nine-month-old daughter Vera, lived there with her. Not far from her house was the village of Lyady where Lida had been a baby bird once herself and had grown from a fledgling into a fine young woman. Her mother, who had taught her how to bathe Vera in the beginning, and her father, who had helped her around the house after Andrei's death, both lived there. And so did her elder, married brother Mikola and her childhood friends, relatives, and neighbors. The villages nearest Lyady were Yamnoye, Gryadki, Zarechye, and Grechaniki. In one of them lived her married sister Marylya, and in another lived her best friend Zina, while kind old Auntie Nastulya was living out her days in a third.

In a word, she had her very own segment of the wide world, which was extremely dear to her, and at its center was little Vera.

The Neman River flowed through that segment from south to north and was very much a part of her world: how many times had she gone swimming there in summer or slid across the ice in winter.

At Lyady on the Neman was a partizan patrol, and in the log frame covered with potato tops, was their outpost. It was in the framework instead of a house because there hadn't been any houses in Lyady since fall: a fascist punitive expedition had burned them all down. Now there were only dugouts, sheds, drying-barns, cellars covered with straw, burned fences, and a few solitary, bare linden trees, wild pears, birches, and maples. Among the dugouts, trees, wattle fences, and fire-blackened ruins, that unusual framework always struck the eye. And when she looked at it, her heart was not so heavy and she felt more at ease for her child, herself, and all people of good will. At night, from the virgin forest reconnaissance units, platoons, and occasionally, a whole detachment or brigade ventured forth across the Neman. When she heard the merry lads exchanging jokes, and listened to their horses snorting and stamping their hooves on the boards of the raft or splashing in the water by the river bank, she was pleased by the thought that Vera would sleep calmly that night, and she could

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

get a bit of rest as well. For she knew that with the partizans close by, she would rise in the morning and go about her business nearly as calmly as she had before the war.

And that's how it had been until rumors spread of a great and unheard-of misfortune coming their way, the very name of which struck terror in the hearts of one and all. The word which portended such suffering for them all was "blockade".

And that misfortune had indeed crept up on them.

It happened right before mowing season. At sunrise, there was a battle by the Neman. In Dubrov, where the bridge across from the Falcon Brigade's camp was, the battle dragged on for a long time. But in Lyady, the patrol of fifteen men was wiped out in a sudden raid.

Lida only managed to jump from her bed, look out the window, and run out into the yard, but everyone had already headed in the direction of the forest: old women, young girls, and children. Everyone was gone...

Grabbing up the only thing she could never forget or leave behind, her warm, sleepy little Vera, Lida ran after them.

Behind her at the Neman and in the village, shouting and shooting were heard. The fire began to spread. Bullets whizzed past the heads of the fugitives, and mines thudded as they hit the ground, scattering shell fragments as they exploded. The hapless residents of Lyady ran down the road and across the field thick with grain, and Lida could not catch up with them no matter how hard she tried, for she was carrying her child. It was not that the baby was heavy or awkward to carry, but every time she tried to run faster, Vera would wake up and choke with tears. So by the time she reached the edge of the forest with her daughter, they were quite alone. She only remembered the boots she had left under the bed when the thornbushes began to prick her feet, but she kept on running until she reached the birch wood. Then she made her way deep into the underbrush, ducking under low-hanging branches. She lost her kerchief, tore her dress, and stumbled twice. Only when she stumbled on a root the third time and almost fell down did Lida slow her pace, pressing her daughter to her heaving breast.

"Quiet, my little one, quiet," she said. "Don't cry. There, now..."

But she was ready to break down and cry herself.

She was all alone. There was only forest ahead and the child in her arms—a child who kept her from catching up with the others. How could she catch up, where would she run to? She might be caught herself any moment now, for the gunfire was getting closer and closer...

Out of that terror was born the thought that everything around was dead, and that soon, her turn would come as well...

"Quiet, little one, quiet. Don't cry. Someone might hear..."

She whispered softly, trying to comfort the baby, but tears streamed from her eyes.

The sun had just risen from behind the trees into a clear sky when Lida, who was still moving farther and farther from the roaring cannon and whizzing bullets, came upon three armed men in a thicket. One of them was holding the reins of a horse. At first, she didn't recognize them, and she was frightened, but then she exclaimed joyfully:

"Thank goodness it's you, boys!"

She had found Zhenya Sakovich, Ivan Fedorin, and Sereda from Grechaniki. Her Andrei had been a partizan in their detachment for more than a year before his death.

2

The three partizans, of whom one was wounded and only one had a horse, were all that was left of the reconnaissance detachment.

...It had all happened so quickly and unexpectedly.

At sunrise, they had returned from their assignment. Their mounts were sweaty from the long journey and fast pace, and as soon as they slowed down to a walk, the horses began to cut up merrily and stamp the deep sand with their hooves. The riders could exchange a few words and have a smoke.

Having run its short sleepless course, the summer sun shed ray of light in the north. The sun which had set in the northwest only a short while before had run its course and was peeking up over the horizon in the northeast. It paused before beginning to rise slowly upward. It was way beyond the forest, above the crest of the trees, the rosy-fingered dawn was still shy about making its presence felt. The first lark would soon awaken and, shaking the fresh dewdrops from its warm gray plumage, would rise in flight, announcing the dawning of a new day in ecstatic song.

Shura Suchok was riding far ahead today. Chestnut cantered evenly, and the saddle squeaked tiresomely in time with her motion. As always, the automatic hung at his chest. Today, even he, a very cautious and attentive lad, looked calmly ahead. They had only to cross the highroad, pass those villages, skirt a meadow, and they would have reached the safety of the forest. And there wasn't much to those villages anyway: only Zagorodye which spread out over the hills on both banks of the narrow river Uzhanka. Determining the direction of movement for the whole group, when he reached the middle of the village, Shura turned right, crossed the broad, sandy highroad, and trotted down the hill into the dell, to the bridge.

Not long ago, a seemingly insignificant event had made quite an impression on all the guys. That night, their reconnaissance group was on an assignment which took them almost under the very nose of the fascist garrison. Shura was standing watch at his post by the last house of the village. When his friends came to get him, they didn't find him in the appointed place, so they began to search for him in alarm. Shura Suchok was standing under a tree no more than two hundred paces from the houses next to the barbed wire fence which surrounded the garrison. "What in the world did you do that for?" the commander shouted at him later when they were back at camp. "Would it have done anyone any good if they had mashed you like a bug?! A fine one you are!" "If anything had happened," Shura began, attempting to justify his rash action, "I would have given you a signal so you could have gotten away in time." "And what about you?" the commander asked sternly. "The devil only knows what would have happened to me," the boy replied in confusion: he was totally unprepared for such a question, it seemed. "But I would have thought of something, you can be sure of that..."

That incident, though minor, had showed the true worth of this modest, laconic boy who had turned eighteen only recently, having already spent two years in the detachment.

As Chestnut clopped onto the wooden bridge, Shura noticed that at the other end of Zagorodye, there was a stranger bent low to the ground, running from the threshing-floor to the barn. His comrades were riding not far behind, and Shura motioned for them to stay back, while he himself galloped toward the threshing-floor.

As Shura, pierced through by machine-gun bullets, tumbled slowly into bottomless darkness, in the hollow between the few houses of the village shots rang out from all sides. The reconnaissance group had been caught in an ambush.

It seemed to Zhenya Sakovich that he had been the first to realize what was going on, and that he had been the one to lead four of their party of ten to safety in the forest thicket. But the rest could have thought exactly the same thing: it was difficult to understand how they could have escaped from the ring of deadly crossfire.

By the river, in the first glade they came upon after entering the forest, they again ran up against machine-gun fire. This time, the shooting was coming from tanks camouflaged in the bushes. And there, they lost another of their comrades: the merry guitar-player Levko. And Zhenya's horse was shot out from under him. The boys realized this was no ordinary ambush: something quite serious was underway. When soon after, as if on signal from the two ambushes which had already been sprung, machine-gun fire rang out to the north, probably near the brigade crossing on the Neman, and was joined by the exploding of mines and the rumble of ordnance, everything became clear as a bell.

3

"What's going on, Lida?"

The question sounded incongruous as the malicious cracking of machine-gun fire continued to draw nearer, though occasionally it died down. The exploding mines and shells were landing somewhere quite close by. How could a partizan address such a question to a woman, especially one who was half-dead with terror?! But it seemed that each of them had the same thing on his mind. They stood around her in expectation, for she had come from near the Neman where everything had begun. However, she could not tell them anything at all about where the brigade was, what had happened to their detachment, or how to find the rest of their men... Not taking any note of their presence, she unbuttoned her blouse to reveal a firm young breast full of milk. The child greedily leaned toward it, began to suck, and fell silent.

Just then, Zhenya seemed to remember something, fished a first-aid kit from his sack, and proffered it to Ivan, asking:

"Could you take this for me, brother, and make me a sling? My arm feels heavy."

"Are you wounded, Zhenya?" Lida asked in fright.

"I've already had it bandaged," Zhenya replied ruefully, glancing bashfully at her.

The baby had drunk its fill of milk and stopped nursing. Vera smacked her lips, looked at the grass, and stretched out her cute little hand with rosy fingers spread wide.

"Na, na," she said.

Her mother, the only one who understood what the little girl was trying to say, buttoned her blouse, bent over to the tall grass of the forest, and tore off a bunch without looking. She had pulled a whole handful and the baby found what it was looking for: a white fluffy dandelion puff. She drew her hand up into a tiny fist, and all that remained of the flower was a little bit of fluff, and it didn't taste good at all. She spat it out awkwardly and her tiny rosy lips were covered with saliva. At any other time, the onlookers would have found her childish displeasure amusing, and even now, warm affection stirred in their souls, but just then...

Just then, an enormous dark silver bird appeared above the tree tops with a roar. The boys dropped to the ground, and Lida fell with a scream, shielding Vera with her body. Zhenya noticed two oblong objects under the wings of the iron bird hovering directly above them.

"Bombs!.."

They tore through the air with an alarmingly long whistle and wail, racing

to pierce the earth on impact. It had only seemed to them that the bombs had fallen directly overhead, for the two mighty explosions that followed one after the other were rather far away. The very earth shook under them, let alone the people and the poor horse. Then came the shell fragments buzzing through the treetops like bees, breaking branches and cutting down leaves or clicking maliciously and embedding themselves in the limbs and trunks of trees. One large, noisy shell fragment cut through the underbrush very near them and struck a slender alder. The tree swayed uncertainly for a moment then slowly began to fall. Its top caught on the crown of the young alder next to it, turned strangely, and plummetted toward the earth, breaking the branches of its neighbor as it went. Only then did the frightened horse shy, tearing the reins from its master's hands.

Zhenya was struck by terror a bit later when the child began to cry and suffocate from fright. Its screams drowned out the sound of the last few shell fragments that whizzed by.

"Let's go, Lida; you come with us," he said. "Don't cry, little one."

But where could they go?

That narrow forest path had to lead somewhere, so they decided to follow it.

A few minutes later, they saw that the path had betrayed them. It skirted a damp glen and turned sharply to the left in the precise direction from which most of the shooting was coming. There was heavy firing to the south as well. The only way out was eastward, but to the east lay an impassable swamp thick with undergrowth, totally indifferent to the fate of those hapless individuals who had thus far escaped the Germans' ambushes.

"We'll never make it through here with a horse," said Sereda.

He unsaddled his mount and tossed the saddle into the bushes just in case. Then, as if he were at home in a field of buckwheat, he took off the bridle as well. Then, like a master finished with the sowing, he slapped the horse on the rump with the bridle, and cried out almost merrily:

"Giddy up, Sivy! Get out of here! The war's over!.."

That was the first time the uncomfortable thought that everything and everyone behind them had been wiped out was voiced aloud.

Obviously, to emphasize the point, Sereda held out his bloody-fingered hand to his comrades and said:

"Bandage this up, someone."

Zhenya looked at him in surprise then silently pulled a handkerchief from his pocket with his good hand:

"Take this. It's still clean," he said.

4

They tried to move eastward through the bush-clogged swamp. Jumping from one soggy hummock to the next and stumbling in the slush, they would miss a step and fall, get stuck in the mud, and move stubbornly forward once more.

Short, stocky Sereda went first. Behind him strode thin, laconic Ivan Fedorin, a married man. He was carrying two automatics, Zhenya's and his own. Lida hurried behind Ivan, and after her came Zhenya, round-shouldered with adolescence and the tallest of them despite his youth. The wounded arm hung in a sling, and he could feel blood still oozing from the wound. His wrist dangled like a broken wing. His brows were knit under the faded service cap, and his brown eyes were gloomy—obviously not just from the pain.

The shooting and exploding of shells and mines grew fainter and moved further to the west. But the bursting bombs were still quite audible. A couple of times, low-flying bombers and the rumble of a dragonfly-like reconnaissance plane drove Lida and the partizans into the bushes.

Lida had the hardest time of it. Jumping from hummock to hummock with the child, keeping her balance with her arms full, falling so she wouldn't hurt her daughter and getting up with her—that all was next to impossible.

Twice, Ivan Fedorin had stopped and said:

"Let me carry her for a bit."

And twice, she had replied:

"It's all right. I'll carry her myself."

The sun kept rising in the sky, and finally, it was high noon. Lida would not have been so aware of the hunger and thirst if she hadn't lost her milk: Vera sucked the nipple and cried, but to no avail. Moreover, the baby couldn't understand why she should bear all this unpleasantness. Her protest took the only form it could: ceaseless crying which could not be stopped. Sometimes she piped down from tiredness or when the way was easier, but then she would begin to bawl once more. Lida pressed the child to her, kissed it, crooned and reproached it, shedding tears of frustration herself. But as soon as she recalled the danger facing that fair little head, she kissed her daughter more ardently than before and begged her forgiveness...

She tried with all her might not to fall behind the men, on guard lest one of them speak a harsh word about what all that crying might drive them to... Straining to catch the first glance of reproach or malice, she tried to peek into each of those three souls to find out more quickly what the boys thought...

True, they were silent for the time being.

Only Sereda spoke.

Suddenly, he seemed to become the commander, taking it upon himself to lead them to what was, in his words, a completely reliable shelter. He was the only one who knew the way. In their village of Grechaniki, all the people knew the forest like the palm of their hands, because they gathered medicinal herbs there.

"The place I'm going to take you," he said, "not even old Hanna knows. My late father showed me the way, may he rest in peace. A lot of delphinium herbs grows there. When we were under the Poles, it wasn't worth going after them, but when our guys turned up in '39, then I started to make a bundle. We found so much of it, Ivan Sobolev and I, that they printed an article about us in the newspapers, saying we were shock-workers and such."

He was talking about a herb that was even used in airplane manufacture. It grew only in the remotest thickets others could reach only in winter when the swamp was frozen. Somewhere there on one of the islands in the swamp was a safe place where the fascists would never find little Vera. If only he didn't get lost, if only he could find the way, if only the baby would stop crying...

"Oh, my goodness, I've fallen again," Lida thought to herself. "I've stumbled and fallen and have to get up again using one hand for support. But my hand has pushed through the grass and is stuck elbow-deep in the mud... Thank you, Ivan, for helping again. Oh, Lord, now the baby's crying again. Quiet, little one. My, what a nuisance you are!.."

"If I didn't know the way, I wouldn't be taking us there," the same voice muttered from ahead. "Don't you worry, I'll get us there, and we'll be sitting pretty in the lap of the Good Lord. But I'm afraid the Germans will hear us if we don't turn down the music a bit. If they find us, they'll make short work of us for sure!"

"Quiet, little one, quiet. Don't cry so."

Zhenya followed Lida in silence trying to overcome the pain that racked his body. He listened quietly to the crying of the baby and Sereda's endless mumbling, thinking to himself:

"I wonder why he shouted to his horse: 'The war's over!' What did he mean by that? And it seemed he even got some weird pleasure out of showing us his bloody finger. Why is it that this self-styled warrior who was dragged forcibly from his hut not long ago, the lazy lout, has suddenly become our leader? 'I'll lead us all to hiding,' he says. Lida is the only thing in his way—and not even Lida, but little Vera... Why has he forgotten his fallen comrades so quickly? He doesn't seem to care at all what's going on in the villages today: how many of our fathers, children, and girlfriends have been shot or burned alive. Maybe Shura isn't dead at all but only wounded. Maybe they're hanging him right now. And he, calm and taciturn as ever, is saving his last strength to spit in the eyes

of those butchers. Where are all our comrades? Where is the brigade?.."

...Towards evening, their path was blocked by a river. It wasn't very wide. Sereda found a long stick and began measuring the depth. But it was impossible to tell where the bottom began because the stick kept going farther and farther down. Nearby they found a dry aspen trunk which had been there since winter. It was just long enough to span the river, so they made a bridge. Ivan Fedorin crossed first to make sure it would hold. He took off his shoes, just in case, and left their weapons behind. He crossed, and the tree trunk held. Sereda went over next with the automatics. Zhenya was to cross next, for Lida stood to the side waiting for him to go.

"Let me carry Vera across," he said. "You've had a hard enough time walking all this way with her.

But she looked at him strangely and said only:

"Go on."

"What's the matter, Lida?"

But she just repeated:

"Go on." Then she added: "You're wounded, Zhenya. It will be difficult for you to cross, even alone."

When he had reached the other side, Zhenya stood there pale and silent looking first at the woman's bare, mud-blackened feet, treading with splendid confidence over the pole, then at the arms clutching the child for dear life. It seemed there was no power on earth that could tear those feet from the tree trunk or arms from the child.

She made it across and again dragged herself along behind them.

Zhenya was dying to ask her: "That means you don't trust even me—not even me?" What if she will answer "No, I don't" as sharply as she had twice said "go on".

5

Again the crying started!..

Until that day, the little girl had known only one thing: at that time the evening before, on the table by the bed, a lamp had burned. And she had lain with her mother, covered with a light sackcloth. True, her mother only lay with her when she had to be fed. Whose business was it that she was already full and it was time for her to tuck her tiny pink fist under her cheek and go to sleep, smacking her little lips in her dreams! Who would dare to take away her sweet dreams, that sacred right of babyhood? She didn't just suckle: she raised her eyes to her mother and smiled playfully. Her mother couldn't help smiling in

reply. She started kissing her mother, cooing and biting her mother's lips with her first tiny milk teeth. She won in the end, rose up, and dived for the breast again.

But that morning, a beast which snatched away everything from her at once had appeared. Now all around her was nothing but dark and cold, while the vast forest had taken the place of her cozy little room. Her mother was sitting on the ground, rubbing her cold feet, pressing her priceless treasure to her chest, and whispered helplessly and barely audibly:

"My little darling, what can I give you to eat?"

The evil beast had driven them from their nest and was chasing after them with machine-guns, mines, and bombs which had made the baby's mother lose her milk...

The little girl was trying in vain to bring it back. It wasn't just a pastime or game now that forced her to suckle: she was experiencing hunger for the first time in her life.

She was crying, and her sobs were quiet and terrible...

Next to them in the dark, someone was muttering discontentedly:

"What are we going to do with you? You give us no peace, day or night, and you'll lead us all to our deaths..."

"Who's leading you? Tell me who's leading you? Tell me—what are you talking about?!"

Lida wanted to add something else, but when she realized once again the hopelessness of her situation, she burst out crying instead:

"Oh Andrei, Andrei, if only you were alive to see what's happening!"

...But Andrei did see. He was there with her, standing large as life before Zhenya's eyes, listening to the bitter tears of those who were dearer to him than anything. And he was reproaching his comrades with his sad gray eyes. "What's gotten into you?" he asked.

Behind those words was so much: his comrades-in-arms, nights of ambushes and encounters, and the first good news from the front... There were the times before they joined the detachment—and there was nothing to join, really, because the detachment didn't yet exist. They were all young Komsomol members who gathered at the house of their older comrade Andrei to discuss what steps to take...

And then there was Shura Suchok...

"If anything had happened, I would have given you a signal so you could have gotten away in time..." "And what about you?" "The devil only knows what would have happened to me. but I would have thought of something, you can be sure of that..."

He didn't say any more.

"...If by cowardice, faint-heartedness, or malicious intent, I break my oath

and betray the cause of the people," the words of the oath they had taken when they joined the partizans rang in Zhenya's head, "may I die a shameful death at the hands of my comrades."

"We haven't broken our oath yet," thought Zhenya, "but we're headed in that direction. We are weak and frightened. And in our fright, we submitted to the most cowardly among us, because he promised to lead us to a safe hideaway. Only the baby is in our way, because it might give us away to the Germans with its crying... What would happen if we had to choose who to save—ourselves or the baby? Who would our guide sacrifice? We would probably stand by in silence as we are now listening to all his muttering. What will happen if despite all Sereda's knowledge of the forest, we run up against some fascists? Then we'll save our necks only by some horrible betrayal, we're all so terrified of our own shadows. What will our guide say then? And what about the rest of us? Will we keep silent then, too?"

Zhenya rose, leaning on his good left hand and unfastened his holster...

"It's time to put a stop to it, Ivan," he said.

It seemed Ivan, who was quiet and even unnaturally calm, had been waiting for those words.

The two of them rose and walked over to the third. Zhenya ordered:

"Get up, Sereda! We need to have a little talk."

6

The headquarters of the grouping of the fascist armies which was charged with liquidating the Nth patrizan formation pictured their task thusly:

Forest zone N was the base of the formation. At the very center of the zone, supposedly in the densest thicket was located the headquarters which directed the actions of all the individual partizan groups. The goal of the operation was to drive all these groups from the whole territory into the forest, surround the forest with a solid ring of soldiers, and tighten the ring until all the partizan forces had been driven into a single place around their headquarters. Then they would be utterly devastated. Account was taken of the possibility that the partizans would try to rebuff the attack, but they would be quickly crushed by the nazi regular troops. Then tactics would be changed, and they would begin combing the forest to entrap the partizans, driving them into enclosures and rounding them up. Infantry units would sweep through the forest to drive the big partizan fish and the small-fry into the nets which would be awaiting them at the center. The infantry was to cover the ground thoroughly; it should find nothing impenetrable, for rubber coveralls had been issued, and the men were using German shepherds

and had plenty of ammunition. The "round up" tactic consisted of ambushes being set up on the roads and paths and in the clearings the partizans would try to use as avenues of escape. The impassable places would be covered by solid cannon and mortar fire and aerial bombing.

The plan of operation was thought up and worked out in the pedantic manner typical of the Germans, however, it failed to yield the desired results. The pitched defensive battle along the approaches to the forest proved to the invaders that the ability of the partizans to resist the regular troops with their artillery, armored cars, and air support had been underestimated. And a far more erroneous estimation of the so-called "barbaric qualities" of the Russians—the gumption of the partizans, their staying-power, and knowledge of local conditions—was made. In practice, the net the fascists hoped to catch the partizans in was not all that tight. The partizans escaped to the enemy rear via routes the fascist round-up crews considered utterly impassable, and that despite heavy mortar and ordnance fire. There were inaccessible islands in the forest, and only the local people knew the way. The unarmed family members—women, children, and old people—of partizans who had left for the forest were concealed there. Besides, the dragnet did not catch all the partizan fish in the vast wood. Small groups of partizans dispersed in the face of the fascist assault and concealed themselves beneath the thick carpet of moss that covered the forest floor or took cover on hummocks in the swamps. They disappeared into the woodwork and waited for the enemy dragnet to pass them by.

And there was another circumstance the fascist headquarters had not taken into account. Some of those the fascists referred to as "big partizan fish" broke through the dragnet with unexpectedly fierce blows and made their way from the forest into the rear of the blockade's forces.

And most important of all, the enemy failed to take account of the people's love of their homeland and the sense of unity inspiring every group and every individual partizan.

There was one enormous partizan world, and for everyone who proudly bore the title of people's avenger, the center of that world was his own group, his section or platoon. And beyond this smallest center was a bigger center: for the platoon, it was the detachment, for the detachment, the brigade, and for the brigade, it was the formation. N forest, as the base of the formation, was adjoined on all sides by woods, copses, and fields that led to the other vast tracts of Byelorussian forest where there were also partizans. In the north, south, and east, formations of Byelorussian partizans operated in conjunction with the people's avengers of other fraternal republics. And that's how this mighty partizan world evolved as a part of the invincible international united front of struggle against fascism.

The ridiculous thought that this world might disappear any instant could have occurred to three of its minor participants only because they were cut off from the rest of the world and overcome by terror for an instant.

At the very moment they were giving way to despair, their fighting family, the Falcon Brigade, was fighting the enemy back. An unequal battle raged on the approaches to the forest the whole day long. It was a battle against an enemy superior in number and arms. Only that night, when it became known that the fascists had broken through the partizan front farther to the north and were surrounding the Falcons from the rear did the brigade abandon its positions. It withdrew deep into the forest over the course of the night, and at sunrise, it turned sharply to the south. Headquarters had decided to test the enemy at his weakest point and try to break through the encirclement into the enemy rear.

On the edge of the Black Swamp, the Falcons met up with the three partizans, the woman, and her child. They were moving westward toward the positions they hoped their brigade was still holding on the banks of the Neman.

"Who led you here?" asked the brigade commander quietly, leaning over in his saddle when he heard the gloomy tale of how his men had been cut down.

He was only twenty-five, and but a year had passed since the night he had been parachuted in to take command of that portion of the partizan movement. The Falcon detachment had grown into a brigade, and its commander had become known far and wide by the name of "Terrible". However, his appearance did not bear out the epithet. The small dark-haired youth in a low astrakhan cap was always merry and never put on airs when addressing his subordinates.

He looked anxiously at the three reconnaissance men and asked quietly: "Who led you here?"

And then it happened that the short stocky lumberjack Sereda, flushed with tension and terror, stepped forward and reported:

"I led the group yesterday, comrade commander. I was leading the way to a safe hiding place. I was frightened out of my wits, scared as some dame."

"You can speak for yourself and for me," the laconic Ivan Fedorin interrupted him suddenly. "It seems to me you and I have been the women here, not her..."

He pointed at Lida and the baby.

Laughter rang out, and a sweeter sound they had never heard from these men who were tired to death, but unsubdued—their own dear men!.. All of them laughed, infantry and cavalry alike. Even the commander joined in.

Only Zhenya didn't crack a smile, for before his eyes was the entire day they had spent retreating into the forest under Sereda's leadership. Zhenya heard the friendly laughter of his comrades and wished the earth would swallow him.

"Well, that's all right, Sakovich. Such things happen on occasion," said the commander.

"But today Sakovich led us, Comrade Commander..." Sereda blurted out.

"I can see that," the commander interrupted him. "Sakovich needs a horse. Nesterenko," he said to his adjutant, "you can get him a mount from the third platoon. And get a couple of horses for these brave fellows, too," he continued, pointing mirthfully at Ivan and Sereda. "Although I would gladly send them with the infantry. It's easier to earn forgiveness on foot, isn't that right, Sereda?"

"Commander, I'll do my best to earn forgiveness..."

"I know you will."

Now he had only to give the order, and they would all be on their way, but the commander had forgotten one more thing.

"What shall we do with this woman?" he asked.

No one said a word, so he who was known as "the Terrible" answered his own question:

"We can't leave her here. That's out of the question. But we can't take her with us either. That's no place for a woman and child. Tell Grandpa to come here."

Grandpa was the sergeant-major of the brigade. His moustaches were still black as pitch, but everyone called him Grandpa. He was from Grechaniki, Sereda's village, and was also a lumberjack. During forty years of wandering the forest with an axe, he had learned it like the back of his hand.

"Well, Grandpa, is it far from here to Praglaya?" asked the commander when the sergeant-major appeared.

"You have to go in the direction the sun is moving to get there from here," replied Grandpa without thinking. "It's a good kilometer to Devil's Door, and from there, it's another three kilometers through the swamp... Why do you ask?"

"What do you mean, 'Why?' Where are all our families? We have to take this lady and her little girl there. It is a baby girl you've got there, isn't it?"

"It's a girl all right, Comrade Commander. How could it be otherwise?" replied Lida, smiling for the first time that day. "She's my little partizan."

The little girl had stopped crying: she was anxiously sucking on a piece of bread from someone in the brigade.

"Well, if you say she's to go there, I guess I'm the one to take her," Grandpa replied after reflecting for a moment. "I really don't want to leave you, but someone has to look after this little tike. Now come to Grandpa, and stop slobbering!"

Vera put out a trusting hand and even said: "Na, na!" to Grandpa.

"Don't you worry, brothers," joshed Grandpa to the general merriment of the partizans. "She knows who to make friends with. Old Grandpa doesn't just have a bit of bread. He's got some fatback, too. Well, shall we get going?"

"I guess I should wish you all a safe journey and success," Lida blurted out suddenly.

She shook hands with the commander, Sereda, Ivan, and the others standing nearby, but when she got to Zhenya, she obviously remembered something, because she unexpectedly hugged him and kissed him affectionately like a brother.

"What a fine boy you are, Zhenya," she said.

Then she burst out crying.

"Kiss him all you want, but this is no time for tears," Grandpa said in a low voice. And having said that, he turned to go, but he stopped right

away. "Good luck to you, boys!" he shouted so they could hear, since they were coming toward him in a thundering stream as the horses stamped their hooves.

"And good luck to you, too, Grandpa!" shouted the riders. "Take care not to get so stuffed on mushrooms they make you sick!"

And again the bold, unsubdued lads burst out laughing as they trotted away!

CHINGHIZ AITMATOV

(b. 1928)

Soviet Kirghiz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov was born in the village of Sheker in the Kirov District of the Frunze Region of the Kirghiz SSR. After completing the seven years of schooling then available in Sheker, he went to work as secretary of the village Soviet and tax collector for the region's financial department, posts he held until the end of the Second World War. Later, he studied at the Djambul Veterinary School and the Kirghiz Agricultural Institute, from which he graduated in 1953. Subsequently he worked as a livestock specialist for three years. In 1952, Aitmatov's first short story was published in the almanac *Kirghizstan*. Entitled "Dzuido the Paperboy", it told the story of a Japanese lad who collected signatures under the Stockholm Appeal. In subsequent years, Aitmatov wrote stories about life in Soviet Kirghizia, such as "Sypaichi", "Rough Crossing", "Face to Face", "Rivals", "Meeting with My Son", and "The Little Soldier Boy". In 1957, Aitmatov completed the Advanced Writing Courses of the Soviet Writers' Union.

The freshness and undisguised emotional content of his stories, combined with dynamic plots, vivid descriptions, and stark realism have earned Aitmatov international acclaim. His long story *Jamilya* (1958), a love song in prose, gained wide popularity. In 1959, Louis Aragon translated *Jamilya* into French, and subsequently, it appeared in many other foreign languages. The theme of loyalty in love and friendship is treated by the author in such works as *My Little Poplar in a Red Kerchief, Camel's Eye, First Teacher,* and *Farewell, Gulsary!* All these works are connected by Aitmatov's attempt to gain insights into the spiritual world of his contemporaries.

In 1970, Aitmatov published the long story *White Steamship*. This interesting piece of fiction evoked lively controversy on the pages of *Literaturnaya gazeta* and other papers. Not long ago, another new book by Aitmatov, *The Day, Longer Than a Century,* appeared. Chinghiz Aitmatov writes both in Kirghiz and in Russian and devotes considerable time to translations from Russian into Kirghiz. His works have been translated into almost all the languages of the peoples of the USSR and a great number of foreign languages as well.

Chinghiz Aitmatov

Camel's Eye

CAMEL'S EYE*

1

I had only just dipped my pail into the brook when a frantic yell rang out over the steppe:

"Hey, you, Academician, get a move on or I'll push your teeth in!"

I stood stock-still, and listened. My name is really Kemel, but here I've been nicknamed Academician. It was just as I feared: the tractor down that way was ominously silent. It was Abakir who threatened to push my teeth in. He'd let fly at me again, cursing me, and maybe he'd actually try to hit me. There are two tractors, and only one of me. And with my one-horse trap I'm expected to keep them supplied with water, fuel, lubricating oil, and what-not. With every day the tractors are moving further and further away from the only spring in the district. With every day they move further and further away from the only field base in the whole wide world where fuel is kept in a tank. We tried to move it, but gave up the idea because the base, too, needs the proximity of water. And a chap like Abakir couldn't care less. "I'll push your teeth in," he says, and that's that. "I'm slaving here like a mule," he says, "and I won't have my time wasted by some snotty university student!"

And I am not a university student at all. I never even tried for any entrance exams. I came here, to Anarkhai, straight after school. At the meeting before the send-off they told us that we, meaning me as well, were "fearless pioneers, and courageous conquerors of virgin lands". That's what I was at the outset. And now? I'm ashamed to say it out loud: an Academician. It's Abakir who started calling me that. And it's my own fault, too. I can't keep my thoughts to myself, I get carried away, daydreaming out loud, and then people laugh at me. They can't know that it's not so much my fault as our history teacher's. Aldiarov, his name was. He specialised in local lore. I gobbled up what he told us, and now I have to pay for it...

I drove out of the hollow onto the road without quite filling up my barrel. As a matter of fact, there was never a road here: I made it, going there and back in my trap.

The tractor stood at the far end of a huge black field. There was Abakir, sitting on the roof of the cab, brandishing his fists and cursing me for all he was worth.

*English translation © Progress Publishers 1976
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I whipped my horse. The water splashed from the barrel drenching my back, but I drove on as fast as I could go.

I myself asked to come here. No one forced me. Others went to Kazakhstan where the virgin land development was the real thing, written up by all the newspapers. I was the only one to go to Anarkhai. Work only began here this spring, with just the two tractors doing the ploughing. Last year, Sorokin, the agronomist who is our boss here, experimented with rainfed barley on a small field. The crop wasn't bad, people said. If things continued to go so well, it might be possible to solve the problem of fodder in the Anarkhai steppe.

In the meantime, we have to be very prudent. Anarkhai is terribly dry and hot in summer, so much so that even *tashtiken,* the stone thistle, sometimes dies standing. The collective farms which drive their herds in the autumn for wintering don't venture to till and plant this land, and are waiting to see how others make out first... And that is why we are so few here: just the two tractor-drivers, the two trailer hands, the cook, Sorokin, the agronomist, and me, the water-carrier. That's the lot. I hardly think that anyone knows about us, but then we don't know what's going on in the world either. The only time we hear some piece of news is when Sorokin returns from a trip to the shepherds in the neighbouring area where he goes on horseback to argue with his superiors over the radio and report on the work done here.

And I had pictured it all on such a grand scale! Our history teacher, of course, was entirely to blame. It's he who painted Anarkhai for us in these glorious colours: "This gorgeous wormwood steppe, untouched for centuries, stretches from the Kurdai Plateau to Lake Balkhash with its thickets of reed. Legend says that in old times whole herds of horses, losing their way in the hills of Anarkhai, vanished without a trace, and later droves of horses, gone wild, were seen roaming the steppes. Anarkhai, the mute witness of great battles, is the cradle of nomadic tribes. In our day, the Anarkhai steppe will become a land of transhumant cattle-breeding with the greatest future..." And so on and so forth, more in this vein.

It was all very well studying Anarkhai on the map when it was the size of a matchbox. And now? Now that I have to go chasing there and back in this blasted water-cart all day? In the evening it's almost more than I can do to unharness the horse and give it some of that pressed hay that a lorry has brought. After that I listlessly eat whatever our Aldei gives me, tumble on my bed in the yurt and before I know it I'm dead to the world.

But there's no denying that Anarkhai is truly a gorgeous wormwood steppe. I could wander over it for hours and delight in the beautiful scenery, but I haven't the time.

It wouldn't be so bad, but there's one thing I don't understand: why has

Abakir taken such a dislike to me, why does he hate me so? If I had known what awaited me here... I was prepared to face all kinds of hardships, because I wasn't going to a party, after all! But for some reason I was never worried by the thought of the people I'd have to live and work with here. People were people everywhere...

I came here in a lorry, and the journey took 48 hours. Packed in the lorry beside me was this water-cart here, and I never suspected that it was going to be my undoing.

I came here to be a trailer hand, imagining that I'd learn the ropes that spring and then become a tractor-driver. That's what they told me at the district centre. And with that aim in mind I set off for Anarkhai. But when I got here I found that they already had two trailer hands and were expecting me to carry water. I ought to have refused the job at once, of course, and returned home, seeing that I had never had anything to do with horse collars and shafts. As a matter of fact, I had never worked anywhere yet and only helped my mother at the sugar refinery when they had a *subbotnik*.* My father had been killed in the war. I don't remember him. I didn't want to be a drag on my mother, and decided to strike out on my own. Still, I ought to have gone home at once. But I was ashamed. With all that excitement and talk at the send-off meeting! And my mother refusing to let me go, because it was her dream that I'd become a doctor. But I stood firm and talked her round, promising to be a help. It was my own idea coming here, I couldn't wait to go. So how could I look people in the face if I returned at once? There was nothing for it, a water-carrier I had to be. But my troubles didn't begin there, not through this water-cart.

Standing up in the lorry on the way here, I stared about me with my heart in my mouth—for here, before me, lay ancient, legendary Anarkhai! The lorry raced along a road that was barely noticeable on this gently undulating green plain veiled with a bluish haze in the distance. The ground still exhaled the smell of melting snow. But the moist air was already filled with the young and bitter fragrance of the smoky-green wormwood, sprouting at the roots of last year's dead and broken plants. The wind blowing in my face carried the ringing music of the great open spaces and the clean freshness of spring. We were chasing after the horizon, but it evaded us, retreating over the washed-away crests of the hillocks and every time revealing a new vista of the infinite, rolling steppe.

And I fancied I heard voices from the remote past. The earth shuddered and groaned under the hoofbeats of thousands of horses. With wild whoops and shouts, the mounted nomads carrying their banners aloft and their lances at the ready swept over the steppe like a tidal wave. Strange and bloody battles

**Subbotnik*—voluntary unpaid work performed collectively.—*Ed.*

were fought before my eyes. Metal clanging, men screaming, and horses neighing and hoofing each other. And I myself was somewhere in the midst of the mêlée... The violence abated, the battles were over, and then numerous white yurts sprouted over the newly verdant Anarkhai steppe, plumes of dried-dung smoke rose from the camp, flocks of sheep and herds of horses grazed near by, and caravans of camels with their bells jingling made their stately way, whence and whither I could not know...

The train whistle, drawn-out and reverberating, brought me back to earth. Kicking up thick clouds of smoke over the carriages, the locomotive was galloping away like a horse with a streaming mane and a long, stretched-out tail. That's how it looked to me from afar. The train grew smaller and smaller, became a small black line and finally vanished from view altogether.

We crossed the railway track near a small station that seemed lost in the steppe, and drove on...

I gave myself away completely my very first day here. I was still haunted by the visions I had fancied on the road. And there was this ancient stone image standing on a rise not far from the field base. The grey, roughly-hewn block of granite had stood sentinel here for centuries, sunk deep into the ground and staring stonily into the distance with its dull, lifeless eyes. The right eye, somewhat slanted and nicked by rains and winds, looked blind and empty, spitefully screwed up under the heavy semblance of a lid. It was frightening. I studied the image for a long time and then, at the yurt, asked Sorokin:

"Who could have set this figure up, d'you think?"

He was getting ready to go somewhere, and answered me as he mounted his horse: "Must be the Kalmyks." And rode off.

Now, why couldn't I leave it at that? Oh no. I turned to the tractor-drivers and trailer hands with whom I hadn't struck up any sort of friendship yet, and said:

"No, that's not quite right. The Kalmyks were here in the seventeenth century. And this memorial stone belongs to the twelfth. It was evidently erected by the Mongols during their great invasion of the west. We, the Kirghiz, came together with them from the Yenisei to the Tien Shan region. Kipchak tribes inhabited these parts before our time, and before *their* time the people who lived here had reddish hair and light-coloured eyes."

I would have gone into even deeper history if I had not been cut short by a chap in overalls who stood beside a tractor. This was Abakir.

"Look here, fellow, you're too learned for my taste," he said, and glowered at me. "Go to the yurt and get me the grease gun."

Apparently, I brought him the wrong thing.

"You poor fish of an academician," he mocked with set teeth, squinting at me with his bloodshot, spiteful eyes. "Lecturing us ignorants when you can't even tell a horse from a camel."

And that started it. The nickname "Academician" stuck.

And here I was already almost there with the water, and still he went on cursing me, running towards me, his legs getting stuck in the freshly ploughed earth.

"Must you crawl like a squashed louse? How much longer am I supposed to wait? I'll strangle you, and good riddance of one snotty academician at least!"

I drove up to the tractor without saying a word. And what was there to say? It was my fault that the tractor was standing idle. It's good thing that Kalipa, the trailer hand, stuck up for me.

"Stop it, Abakir," she told him. "Cursing won't help. Look at him, the poor kid's dead beat!" She took the pail from my shaking hands and poured the water into the radiator. "He's trying his hardest. Can't you see he's dripping wet?"

"What's it to me?" Abakir snapped. "He should have stayed at home, reading his books."

"Come on, stop it," Kalipa coaxed him. "You're full of spite, and it's not nice, Abakir."

"I'd starve to death if I didn't keep a fellow like this one on his toes. It's me who's answerable for the plan, not you. Does it worry anybody that this learned idiot is killing my plan for me?"

How he did harp on my learnedness! Why did I ever go to school, and why did I have to have that history teacher!

I tried to get away from here quickly. The water was wanted at the other end of the field as well. The tactor-driver was Sadabek, a serious older man, and though he did get angry he never yelled at me.

I heard Abakir starting his tractor and getting down to work. I heaved a sigh of relief and shivered in my soaking wet sweater. Now, why is Abakir so mean, so spiteful? He isn't old yet, just past thirty. His face is rather heavy, true enough, with the cheekbones sticking out, and he has grasping, claw-like hands, but he cuts an impressive figure, just the same. His eyes are unkind, cruel eyes. He literally sees red at the slightest provocation, and then he lets fly.

This is what happened the other day. It started raining in the evening, the drizzle went on all night, whispering something sad and monotonous as the drops trickled down the waterlogged felt of the yurt, and it did not stop when morning came. We were stuck in the yurt, bored with this enforced idleness. Sorokin, the agronomist, was away—he had his hands full, rain or shine. He was responsible for the stock breeding as well, and so he was in the saddle all day with never a moment's rest.

When the rain more or less stopped, Esirkep who was a trailer hand and the younger brother of Sadabek took my horse and rode away to the shepherds. Aldei and Kalipa went to fetch water from the spring, and there were the three of us left in the yurt—Abakir, Sadabek, and myself.

We were glumly silent. Abakir sprawled on his bed with his legs stuck out, and smoked. Sadabek squatted on a horse-cloth near the hearth and, armed with an awl and wax-end, was mending one of his boots. And I sat huddled in a corner, reading.

The yurt was a damp and dismal place. The soaked felt stank of sheep. Large drops, the colour of tea, collected and plopped down every now and again. The rain was still muttering something, lisping in the puddles.

Abakir yawned with a bored air, took a big, cracking stretch, and with his eyes closed flung the stub of his cigarette on the floor. It fell on the edge of the felt, and the wool began to smoulder at once. Sadabek picked up the stub and threw it into the fire.

"You ought to be more careful," he said, pulling the wax-end through the leather. "Was it too much of an effort to get up?"

"Why, what's happened?" Abakir asked with a challenge, looking up.

"The felt caught fire."

"That cheap stuff?" Abakir smirked. "Just keep patching your old boot and mind your own business."

"The cost of the felt has nothing to do with this. You are not alone here, and not in your own house."

"I know that I'm not in my own house! If I were I wouldn't waste breath on you. Got it, you ugly mug with the leather pants? Yeah, must be a punishment for my sins to be stuck here in this convict camp made for fools like you and your wife!"

Sadabek gave the wax-end a furious pull. The awl slipped from his fingers and flew over his shoulder. He gave Abakir a long, hate-filled look, then strained forward menacingly with the boot clutched in one hand and the wax-end, stretched taut as a wire, in the other.

"Good. I am a fool and my wife was a fool to come here with me to cook for all of us," he said, breathing heavily. "And what about everyone else in Anarkhai, are they all convicts? Was it you who made them come here? Answer, you son of a bitch!" Sadabek sprang to his feet, changing hands to grip the leg of his hobnailed boot with his right hand.

Abakir snatched up the spanner near at hand and drew his head into his shoulders, preparing to strike.

I was terrified. It was very frightening. They'd kill each other!

"Abakir, don't!" I rushed forward. "Don't hit him! Sadabek, don't, don't start a fight!"

Sadabek flung me aside, and they began circling the yurt, like two snow leopards never taking their eyes off one another. And then both pounced at once, and the spanner just missed Sadabek's head. He ducked at the last moment and gripped it with both hands. But Abakir was very strong. He brought Sadabek down, and they rolled on the floor, cursing and wheezing. I flung myself down on the spanner which Abakir had dropped and, getting hold of it at last, rushed outside.

"Aldei! Kalipa! Come quick!" I yelled to the two women who were coming back with the water. "They're fighting to kill..."

They dropped their pails and ran back to the yurt with me.

Sadabek and Abakir were still rolling on the floor. We pulled them apart. Their clothes were torn and they were covered with blood. Aldei dragged her husband towards the door, and at that moment Abakir broke free from Kalipa's restraining embrace and snarled:

"Just you wait, you hobbling dog! You'll beg me for mercy one day, you dirty scum, you'll learn what Abakir can do!"

Aldei, a small, skinny woman, turned to Abakir and, staring him straight in the face, said:

"You try laying a hand on him! I'll scratch your eyes out. You won't know yourself afterwards."

Sadabek took his wife by the hand.

"Don't, Aldei. He's not worth the trouble..."

I went outside, found the spanner, which I had thrown away in the excitement of the moment, and hid it near the stone image. I squatted on the ground and suddenly burst into tears. The choking sobs shook my whole body. No one saw me, and I myself could not understand what was happening to me. Only the stone image, eavesdropping on my despair, was squinting at me spitefully with its one sightless eye. All around me stretched the wet, misty steppe, silent and wearied. Not a sound disturbed its profound peace, only my sobs. I stayed there for a long time, until it grew dark...

Well, that's what my life is in this gorgeous wormwood steppe. I try my damnedest, but there it is! Abakir has given me hell again. I don't know what to do. But I mustn't give up. A man must stand firm wherever he stands. Until he drops.

"Come on, get a move on!" I urged my horse. "We've got our job to do, you and I, we've no time to brood."

2

The next day I got up at dawn, earlier than usual. I had made up my mind the night before that I'd do my damnedest so that no one would dare scold and

much less curse me. After all, I had to prove that I was no worse than any of the others.

The first thing I did was to deliver the fuel to the tractors and fill them up myself. Next, I drove to the spring with my barrel and then poured water into the radiators before work began. After that I had to have a quick breakfast and go carting water again, without wasting a minute. So far, so good.

In the meantime, the sun came awake behind the whitish line of the horizon. It took a long time to rise, as though afraid to look the length and breadth of the Anarkhai steppe full in the face. Finally it rose a little and peeped out. Can anything be more beautiful than the steppe at dawn! It's like a vast spreading sea, with the blue waves arrested in their movement and shaded with dark green and yellow.

Oh, Anarkhai! Why are you so silent, what are you brooding on? What do you keep secret in your heart, and what awaits you in the future?

Never mind that I'm only a water-carrier. I'll be a master on this land yet, and a master with machines too. After all, the two tractors we have and the work we are doing here is only the beginning. I once read somewhere that some geologists had discovered large rivers running under Anarkhai. Perhaps so far it's only an idea. Anyway, I do believe that people will one day quench Anarkhai's thirst, and green orchards will rise in the steppe, cool water will flow along ditches, and the winds will ripple an ocean of golden wheat. Towns and villages will spring up here, and our descendants will call the steppe a blessed land. And many, many years from now, when another greenhorn like me comes here he certainly won't have to go jogging in a water-cart up and down the steppe the whole day long and get cursed by a bully like Abakir. But still, I don't envy him, because I came here first!

I stopped the cart and admired the scenery. At that moment I was the happiest, strongest and even the most handsome man on earth. Blessed be the great Anarkhai!

At long last the sun rolled out from behind the horizon, and it was huge and radiant.

The day hadn't begun badly for me. At any rate, the engines didn't get stalled, as I was in time with the water.

But it was a long way to go till evening...

On one of my trips to the spring, I found there a small flock of sheep with their lambs. A girl had driven them here. She let them drink from the brook, keeping them away from the spring. Where had she come from, I wondered? Probably from beyond that double-headed hill where the shepherds had their camp. Her face seemed vaguely familiar. I once saw a picture of a young Chinese girl in some magazine or other with her hair cut in a bang just like this girl's.

That was probably why I thought I had seen her before.

We looked at each other in silence. My coming there had startled her as much as her being there had surprised me. However, little put out, I jumped down from my cart and started filling my barrel with water from the spring.

Meanwhile the sheep had drunk their fill, and the girl herded them off. As she passed me, she asked:

"What's this spring called, d'you know?"

I thought for a moment, looking into the circular pool where the water I had stirred up with my pail was gleaming dully. It must be called something, of course, this only spring of ours. While I was thinking, the water settled and looked lighter on the surface and darker in the depths.

"It's called Camel's Eye," I said, turning to face the girl.

"Camel's Eye?" She tossed her hand and smiled. "Lovely! It does look like a camel's eye, it's so pensive..."

We started talking. It turned out that she and I hailed from the same place,

and she even knew my history teacher, Aldiarov. Gosh, wasn't it wonderful to hear the name of your favourite teacher here, in the steppe, from a strange girl, who I suspected, had also been influenced by him in choosing to come to Anarkhai. She had finished school the year before—not the school I went to—and was now a shepherd's assistant.

"The well water is salty where we are," she was saying. "And I heard people say that there was a spring somewhere hereabouts. I wanted to see some flowing water myself, and water the lambs so they'd know what real, live water tasted like. When they're big enough I'll hand them over to the flock, and in the autumn I'll go to the university."

"I plan to study later on too," I told her. "Mechanics is what I'm keen on. You see, I was sent here to assist with the tractor, and this thing here," I indicated the water barrel, "I'm just helping out, temporarily ... another chap has been promised us for the job..."

I shouldn't have lied so outrageously, of course, but the words were out before I knew it. I felt unbearably hot from embarrassment, and went cold the next moment.

"Hey you, Academician! I'll push your teeth in!" Abakir's hateful voice reached us from far away.

"I mustn't stand chatting any longer."

"What did he want?" the girl asked. Evidently she had not made out Abakirs' words.

"Nothing really," I mumbled, flushing. "Water's wanted, that's all."

She drove the sheep home. And Abakir, standing on the roof of the tractor at the far end of the field, was yelling for all the world to hear and brandishing his fists.

"I'm coming, coming! Shut up, will you? Yelling like mad in the hearing of strangers!" I whispered in despair, and whipped my horse to a gallop.

The water in the barrel swilled and splashed, drenching me from head to toe every other minute. I didn't care if there wasn't a drip left in the barrel. I've had all the bullying I could take.

Abakir leapt down to the ground and started towards me, as he had done the day before. I reined in my horse.

"If you're going to yell like that, I'll drop this job and leave," I told him.

This startled him for a moment, then he whistled and spat out a string of obscenities.

"Anarkhai did fine without you, snotty Academician, and it won't perish now, damn and blast it! So get going, get the hell out of here! I'm not taking any backchat from a guttersnipe of a student."

I leapt down from the cart, flung my whip over the tractor and strode off.

"Kemel, stop! You can't do that! Stop, I tell you!" Kalipa shouted.

But this only made me walk the faster.

"Let him go, let him go to hell," I heard Abakir's voice. "We'll manage without him."

"You're a beast you are, look what you've done now!" Kalipa scolded.

I could hear them quarrelling and yelling for a long time.

Without slowing my step I strode farther and farther away from them. I didn't care where I went. There was not a soul in sight, and all the roads lay open before me. I passed the spring, the field camp, and the stone image. This old woman followed me with her stony look and malicious smirk, and herself remained standing there, sunken into the ground, as she had stood for centuries.

I walked on mindlessly. My only desire was to get away from there as quickly as possible, and let this damned Anarkhai admire the back of my head.

The steppe spread before me—desolate and indifferent. All the hillocks, rises and hollows were sickeningly alike. Who had created this dead, dismal monotony? Why must I, insulted and humiliated, measure these endless miles of grey and bitter wormwood? There was nothing but lifeless desert anywhere you looked. What did people want here anyway? Wasn't there room enough in the world? My dreams of early morning seemed ridiculous to me now.

"That's your gorgeous wormwood steppe for you, your blessed Anarkhai!" I mocked myself, feeling with all my being how impotent I was, a homeless, crushed thing.

Above me was the lofty sky, around me spread the vast steppe, and I saw myself as a tiny speck against all this, a small and solitary human being, wearing a padded jacket, tarpaulin boots and a shabby, faded cap, who had strayed into this strange country from heaven knows where.

I walked on. There was no path, no road. I just walked. "I'll come out to the railroad somewhere," I was thinking. "I'll go along the track, and get on a freight train at some station or other. And I'll go where there are people..."

I did not even turn round to look when I heard the drumming of hoofs and a horse snorting behind me. Must be Sorokin. Couldn't be anyone else. He'd start scolding and coaxing, but to hell with him—I shan't go back, I won't even consider it.

"Kemel, stop!" Sorokin called out, not yelled.

I stopped. Sorokin rode up to me on his sweating horse. He looked at me with his blue, intent eyes from under an overhang of sun-bleeched eyebrows, groped in his field bag and brought out a red piece of paper—my Komsomol assignment which I had so proudly handed him when I arrived.

"Here, you musn't leave this behind," he told me calmly, and held out the paper to me.

In his eyes I read neither reproach nor contempt. He did not condemn or pity me. His was the grave look of a very busy man who had become accustomed to all kinds of surprises. With the palm of his hand he wiped the sweat off his tired face which was sprouting a reddish bristle.

"If you're heading for the station, keep right, it's over there, along that hollow," he pointed in that direction and, turning his horse round, slowly rode off.

I was stunned to do anything but stare. Why hadn't he cursed me, why hadn't he tried to make me change my mind? Why did he sit his despondent horse so wearily? His family—his wife and children—lived somewhere far away, and he had been all alone here for years, riding round the steppe in circles. What was keeping him in this desert, what was he really like inside?

Slowly, I shuffled after him, I really don't know why.

That evening we were all gathered in the yurt. No one spoke. It was very quiet, except for the dry crackling of the fire. It was all my doing. No one had said anything yet, but judging by the strained look on Sorokin's glum face he was about to speak.

"Well then, what are we to do?" he spoke at last, addressing no one in particular.

"Why, is a flood threatening Anarkhai or something?" Abakir asked with a sneer.

Sadabek got up without a word and left the yurt. He wasn't speaking with Abakir after that fight, and apparently did not want to get involved now. His brother Esirkep also rose to go, but changed his mind and sat down again.

Esirkep was also on bad terms with Abakir. Once, I asked him to switch jobs with me for a day, and he let me assist Sadabek at the tractor while he took over my water-cart. Well, naturally, he did not deliver the water fast enough to satisfy Abakir and was duly cursed. But Esirkep wasn't the sort to be bullied, he could hold his own in a fight, and yet he was only three years older than I.

Nobody replied to Abakir's sarcastic question, and he then said: "What's there to think about? The person responsible for work stoppage has got to take his medicine, that's all."

"That's beside the point," Sorokin said without looking at Abakir. "The future of a young man is at stake."

"What future?" Abakir said. "The fate of academicians like these had long been sealed, they're a useless breed!" He made a gesture of dismissal. "Judge for yourself, Sorokin, what are they good for? While we sweated to provide food for them, they did nothing but to go to school, for ten years or even more. We fed them, clothed them, and gave them an education, and what's the result, what did they learn in those schools? They don't know the first thing about

motors, they don't know how to put a collar on a horse, they can't even tighten the hame-strap properly... Now, why should I do his sweating for him? What damn use is his learnedness to me? So what, that he's an expert on stone images? And when it comes to work, he bungles it. All right, clear out and good riddance since others have to stand idle because of you. You'd better not try putting me in the wrong, Sorokin. I'm working for two, without a relief, and I'm not going to hold the bag for anybody. If I don't suit you, I'll leave this very moment. But I'll always say what I said just now: what I'd do to all these academicians..."

"We know all about it," Sorokin cut him short, still without looking his way. "We're talking about something else. You tell us, Kemel, what do you think about it all?"

I didn't reply at once. There was a grain of truth in what Abakir said. But why did he speak of me with such spite and animosity? Was I so dumb that I'd never learn what Abakir knew? Or would my learnedness, as he called it, stand in the way? It was more than I could understand. Still, I tried to reply to Sorokin's question as calmly as possible.

"I came here to work as a trailer hand. It was important for me. And as for the horse collar and hame-strap, I have no more trouble with these. Everyone knows it, and Abakir does too. I could go on working here the way things are, but I refuse to be a water-carrier. It's a point of principle."

"We've no other work for you," Sorokin said.

"Therefore I must leave."

Kalipa looked at me and sighed regretfully.

"I'd let you have my job, Kemel, and drive the water-cart in your place, but you won't agree, will you."

This was unexpected. It could be simply her kindness, or perhaps what made her say it was the awkwardness she always felt on account of Abakir when he yelled and cursed and she tried to take the sting out of his rudeness—I don't know what prompted her, but she said it, and on the spur of the moment I went and said: "I agree."

A silence fell. There was no sound, save the crackling of the fire.

Everyone looked at me in dismay, probably waiting for me to come to my senses and decline the offer. It seemed I was surrendering myself of my own free will to a man who hated me and wished me nothing but ill. But I did not speak. I wasn't going to back out now. Sorokin gave me another searching look, and asked curtly: "You sure?"

"Yes."

"Makes no difference to me," Abakir said, and spat into the fire. "But I'm warning you: first time wrong, you'll get it in the neck from me!" In the half-light, his eyes flashed chillingly at me, and they held mockery and a challenge.

"What do you mean, first time wrong?" Esirkep, who had kept silent all this time, burst out. "Threatening him already, are you? Sure he'll manage, there's nothing to it, and besides he's tried my job before."

"No one asking you. Mind your own bloody business. It's me who's responsible for my tractor, and the work..."

"Stop it!" Sorokin spoke sharply to Abakir once again. "You start tomorrow morning, Kemel. And now it's time we all turned in." He rose and started for the exit.

I hardly slept a wink that night, wondering how I'd get on with Abakir. Until now I have only had occasional contacts with Abakir, and as from tomorrow I'd be under his command all the time, day and night. The duties of a trailer hand did frighten me, although they did call for a lot of patience and endurance. Of course, I had to learn the knack of raising and lowering the ploughshares with speed and precision at the right moment so as not to hold up the tractor, but apart from this I'd have to help Abakir in everything as far as the maintenance of the machine and repairs were concerned. I could just see myself handing him the wrong spanner, the wrong bolt or something...

It appeared Aldei could not sleep either. She came across to me in the darkness, sat on the edge of my bed, and stroked my hair.

"Give it another thought, Kemel. You're not a match for him. You're kind-hearted and gentle. And he'll pester the life out of you, you'll never please him..."

"I don't intend to please him. And I'm used to his pestering, you know."

"Oh well, you know best," she said quietly and with a sigh went back to her bed.

3

My duel with Abakir began the very first day.

"If you fall asleep, don't tumble under the blades. I won't stand answer for you." This was all Abakir said to me before we started ploughing.

However, sleep was farthest from my mind. All my faculties were tensed to do a faultless job of work. If one let oneself worry about falling under the blades, one had better give up at once.

My feet, spread wide apart, rested on the frame to which the steel ploughshares were fixed. The blades moved at a slant, one after the other, ripping up the virgin soil and turning over the thick, steaming clods of turf. The tracks clanged and the engine hummed busily as the tractor moved on, crushing the wormwood into the ground, and never slowing its pace.

Abakir did not turn round once to see how I was doing. All I could see of

him was the back of his head which had a hard and obstinate look. It was obvious that he would go on trying me to the utmost, until I either begged off or convinced him that I could take it. Maybe that's why he raced the tractor without a stop, because he knew perfecty well how grim it was to sit for hours on this hard unsprung metal seat, choking with the dust and the exhaust. However, I wasn't going to give up. I tensed all my faculties to the utmost—nerves, sight, hearing, and hands clutching the control lever. I did not utter a word, I kept silent even when Abakir drove over the stony patches with an obviously malicious enjoyment where the plough got pushed out of the furrow all the time, where the blades scraped against the stones, cutting sparks and sending up a smell of burning, and where I was jolted terribly and all but thrown out. In the evening, when Abakir at last stopped the tractor, I was dead beat, I had never felt so tired in my life. My mouth, nose, ears and eyes were choked with dust and sand. I wished I could drop down on the ground and sleep. But I made no attempt to leave my seat, and waited for Abakir's orders.

"Raise the blades," he called out, poking his head out of the cab. He drove the tractor off the ploughed field, throtted down the engine, and came to look at the plough, bending down to feel the edge of the blades. "They have to be changed, they're blunt. See it's done by morning."

"All right," I said. "Leave me the spare blades and move the tractor away from the plough."

He did as I asked, and without a word to me strode off to the field base. As I watched him go, I caught myself thinking that besides being mad with him I also envied the man. Here he was strolling along as if he wasn't a bit tired! He had run me ragged, but then he hadn't had a moment's rest himself. The man was certainly a fiend for work.

I had to make a fire, so I could change the blades in the night, and with a sigh I started gathering the dry stalks, heaping it around the plough. When I had a large pile, I went to get my supper.

Dear, kind Aldei! How sorrowfully she gazed at me as I quickly and silently ate the *beshbarmak* she had kept warm for me. I couldn't afford to sit and dawdle over my food. When I had finished I asked her to get me the lantern which we kept for an emergency.

"What d'you want it for?" Aldei asked, handing me the lantern.

"I'm going to change the blades."

"Oh no, this won't do!" she cried, and let fly at Abakir. "I won't let you work your spite off on a mere kid! I won't let you, you hear?"

"All right, don't. What's it to me?" Abakir said, getting into bed.

"Keep out of this," Sadabek told his wife. "Kemel must know what he's doing."

"Don't worry, Kemel, we'll help you. Come on, Esirkep," Kalipa also rose to come with me.

"Don't bother," I told them, "I'll manage."

I walked out of the yurt, lighting my way with the lantern.

The darkness seemed infinite and mute. I went down to the spring to have a drink of water. The water, gurgling faintly in the neck of the spring and gleaming dully in its dark and dreamy depth, was beautifully cool and soothing. The spring really did look like a camel's eye. The thought brought back a memory of the shepherd-girl. I hadn't even asked her name. I wondered what she was doing now, that sweet girl with her hair cut in a bang?

Once back at the plough, I got down to work immediately. I raised the blades as far as they would go, and started the fire. The lantern, of course, came in very useful too. As I unscrewed the nuts I screwed them onto the bolts and placed them in my cap where I couldn't lose any. I crawled and wiggled under the plough all night long. Screwing on the nuts was hard enough, and it was awkward besides, because they were so hard to get at where they were seated. The fire kept going out, and I had to crawl out from under the plough and, lying on the ground, fan it to flame again. I didn't know the time, nor how long it took me to change all the blades. Finally, when I was through, I somehow made my way to the tractor, with my mind in a haze, and went to sleep in the cab. My badly scratched hands burnt and ached even in sleep.

Kalipa woke me early in the morning, when she had driven up in the water-cart.

"I've already filled the radiator. Come and wash, I'll pour for you," she told me.

She didn't ask me how it had been, and I was grateful to her for this. I hate to be pitied. She had brought me some food and a bottle of *dzharma.* This pleasantly sour beverage, made from roasted wheat, tasted wonderfully refreshing. It was Aldei, of course, who had sent it.

Abakir did not say a word when he came. And there really was nothing he could find fault with. In silence, he backed the tractor to the plough, I linked the trailer to it, and we started down the field again.

I did not feel nervous any more. The first test is always the hardest, and having stood it I would now hold out till the end!

Every time I looked in the window of the cab I saw the back of Abakir's head. The tractor roared and clanged without a pause, like the day before. And I jogged along on the hard metal seat, clutching the control lever.

At about noon, Abakir suddenly throttled down the engine.

"Climb down," he said to me. "We make a break."

We squatted on the ground in the shade provided by the tractor, and did

not speak. Abakir lit a cigarette and smoked it, irritably biting at the tip. Then he took off his overalls and shirt and, spreading them on the ground, lay down on his stomach to sun himself. His muscular back was broad and sweaty. I also took off my shirt, and just as I was spreading it out to lie down on it and take a sunbath, Abakir raised his sullen, sleepy face and barked out an order: "Scratch my back for me." Never doubting that I'd rush to do his bidding, he dropped his heavy head on his arms and waited.

I neither moved nor spoke.

"You hear me?" Abakir twitched his shoulders angrily, but did not lift his head.

"I'm not going to scratch your back."

"Oh yes, you are!" He made a jerk towards me on his arms. "How much longer must I wait?"

I moved a little away from him.

"You are always beating your chest and yelling that you're a workman, feeding the whole world," I said. "But you're a workman only because you work, while at heart you're not one at all. You'd make a fine *bey*.

"And I would, too! And you're too damned nosey!" he said and, quite unexpectedly, flicked me on the nose.

I leapt to my feet and went for him. He must have been waiting for this. The blow which sent me rolling was charged with all the hatred and rancour which had become accumulated in him during these past few days. I rose to my knees with an effort and, blinded with fury, rushed at Abakir once again.

"I'll give you a good taste of my fist! I'll show you!" Abakir muttered, hitting me with his leaden fists and sending me sprawling almost every time.

But I picked myself up again and again, and went for him. I tried to hit him on the face all the time, to smash his bestial jaw, while his well-aimed blows got me in the stomach, the rib and chest.

I staggered up once more and slowly advanced on him. He raised his arm and, grunting like a butcher, struck me on the neck and felled me. I lay hugging the ground and biting my lips to hold back a moan.

"Lie flat, Academician, and sniff at the ground," Abakir said, breathing heavily and spitting the blood from his broken lips. "It's not quite the same as lecturing people on stone images, is it now?"

He went to collect his clothes which we had trampled on during the fight, shook out his shirt and overalls and took his time putting them on with the look of a man who had discharged his duty. He never suspected, of course, that it was I who had won that battle. Sure, I was down on the ground, but I was undefeated. I knew now that in the fight for justice fists could also be used. For me, this was a victory...

While Abakir was dressing I got my breath back. And when he started the engine, I got up, quickly put on my shirt, and went to take my seat at the plough.

With a roar, the tractor started along the field. Again I saw the back of Abakir's head in the cab window, and again I sat clutching the control lever, a trailer hand once more.

4

Certain changes came into our life. We now had a two-horse cart and a pair of horses for taking the seeds out to the fields, and also a new driver. This made it much easier on the water-carrier. The tractor operated by Sadabek and Esirkep did the sowing, while Abakir and I continued to plough.

Another very important thing happened to me.

One day, as we were riding in the new two-horse cart out to the field after lunch, I saw my shepherd-girl near the spring. I jumped down from the cart. The driver reined in the horses, but Abakir would not let him stop.

"Drive on," he ordered him surlily.

I ran to the girl, and she came towards me, forgetting her sheep. But I never reached her because if I went any further I'd never catch up with the cart and would be late for work. So I stopped halfway and shouted: "Hello!"

"Hello!" she called back, and also stopped where she was.

I was terribly glad to see her, but I didn't know what to say.

"Why don't you come for water any more, where are you working now?" she asked.

"On the tractor tram," I shouted with a ring of pride. "We're over there, in that far field! Sorry, I have to run!"

"Bye-bye!" she waved to me.

I sprinted after the cart, and only looked back once. She still stood there, watching me run. The cart did not stop for me, but I didn't mind. I ran easily and lightly. I was happy that she had waved to me, and that I was running along the great and beautiful steppe...

The next day she appeared near our field. She was standing in a rise, tending her flock of ewes and lambs. I very much wanted to go up and talk to her, if only for a minute, but Abakir would never let me. Was he capable of such generosity? Not he. So I didn't even try asking him.

Abakir was checking something in the engine and I was there with him the next time the girl appeared on the same rise.

"What's she doing here all the time?" Abakir asked me.

"I don't know."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know."

"Oh you, Academician!" He spat in derision, and gave the girl a look. "She looks hot stuff." Ignoring my glare, he barked: "Go take your seat." And we moved off.

In the meantime the girl had driven her flock from the rise down to about a hundred yards from our field. God, how I wished I could run to her, sit with her for a little and talk...

The tractor stopped abruptly. Abakir poked his head out of the cab and yelled: "Secure the lever, and come here!"

He never let me anywhere near his cab as a rule, and so I climbed down from the trailer feeling quite puzzled.

"Get in," he told me, moving over, "and drive."

I was stunned. That's something I never expected from him. Why this sudden change of heart? What happened to Abakir? I got in, prepared to do everything he told me.

"Push down the pedal. Put in the clutch. That's right. Now gently release the pedal. Hold the friction levers..."

The tractor rubbled, started off, and there we were moving down the field. The excitement of it took my breath away. The world was well lost for me, my whole being was concentrated on the job of learning how to drive. I have been dreaming of this moment for such a long time! And here was this powerful machine obeying my touch and going where I wanted it. I myself had become a mechanism, intent only on performing the right action with the utmost precision.

I didn't do a bad about-turn at the end of the field. To be sure, since we had no trailer hand, the gaps at the turn were pretty big, but that wasn't disastrous—after all, there was plenty of land in Anarkhai! What mattered was that I would learn to drive a tractor.

We made several runs. I felt more confident now, and my heart didn't pump so wildly.

"Go to it, Academician. I'll leave you for a moment," Abakir shouted in my ear. "Throttle it down if something happens."

He jumped down from the fast-moving tractor and, brushing the dust off his clothes and sort of preening, headed for the shepherd-girl. She was very close to us now. And it was only then that I guessed what was on his mind. So that was why he let me get into the cab!

Abakir was chatting with the girl, without a care in the world! And why should he worry? His work was being done for him, and the tractor was near enough to run to if something went wrong.

I didn't like the trick he had played on me. But at the same time I was glad to be driving the tractor myself. I wanted to wave to the girl from the cab, and call out something nice to her. If only Abakir didn't hang around her! What was he saying to her, and what was she saying to him? She ought to be on her guard with him, she ought to keep him at arm's length...

This went on for about an hour and a half, until she had to drive her flock home. And all this time I was driving the tractor. When Abakir came back I looked at his face searchingly, but it wore its usual expression of arrogant smugness, nothing else.

"Get back to your place, Academician," he gave me a thump on the shoulder and a crooked smile.

Without a word, I jumped down to the ground.

Our girl was there again next morning. Abakir put me in the cab once more and went to talk to her. I wished she wouldn't come. I couldn't leave the tractor, but I couldn't remain indifferent either. I watched them anxiously from the cab, wondering how to warn her against Abakir. But how could you forbid people to talk to one another? After all, she must know what she's doing...

This time she did not stay long, to my great relief. She was running away across the steppe, never once glancing back, and chasing her flock faster and faster. "Forgive me, darling," I begged her mutely. "I'm glad you left so quickly. You and I will meet again. Go now, don't stop, you sweet girl with the funny bang... And I don't even know your name!"

But I was wrong thinking that we'd meet again soon. The girl did not come again. Abakir and I waited for her for three days, without speaking about it, of course. He was meaner than ever, and again glared at me with unconcealed hatred in his eyes. But then I did not conceal the contempt I felt for him either. He must have offended the girl, and I had failed to protect her from something dark and evil, and so in a way I was to blame. I swore that I'd find her the first chance I had, and talk everything over with her frankly. I began to dream of this, hoping and looking forward to this chance.

It was shortly after this that we got caught in the rain while we were far out in the field. The downpour started suddenly and violently, pelting the steppe with hailstones. In an instant the ground was covered with swollen, seething puddles. But Abakir did not stop the tractor. On the contrary, he put on speed and never glanced back at me once, leaving me exposed to the raging hailstorm.

The soil, heavy with water, no longer fell away from the blades in slices as before, and instead got stuck in the plough, and climbed up the frame on to my feet. I suppose Abakir would not have stopped at all if the tracks had not become anchored by the huge, sticky clods of earth. He throttled down the engine and sat sprawling in his cab, smoking and evidently expecting me to come begging for

shelter. But it was all one to me now, as I was soaked through anyway. I did not get down from my metal seat, and let the pouring rain wash the mud off me. The only thing I tried to keep dry was the notebook in which I jotted down phrases from the books I read and some things of my own. I stuck it into the top of my boot for safety.

The rain stopped abruptly, and the sky cleared up at once, a fathomless, transparent and radiant turquoise again, a continuation, as it were, of the beauty and purity of the spacious steppe, washed by the lavish spring rain. The boundless Anarkhai steppe unrolled even more freely and widely. A huge rainbow appeared in the sky, stretching from one end of the earth to the other, and absorbing all the softest colours in the world. I gazed about me, enraptured. Oh, glory of the blue, infinite and weightless sky, the lovely rainbow, and the pastel-coloured wormwood steppe! The ground was quickly drying, and high in the sky above it an eagle was wheeling on its taut, motionless wings. It seemed that it was not its wings that had lifted the eagle to such heights, but the powerful breath of the earth, the warm currents rising from it.

And I, too, felt an influx of strength. I cheered up, and once more the dream about glorious Anarkhai captivated my imagination. I stood firmly on the ground now, no one could spoil my dream and prevent me from believing in the wonderful future of the steppe. I am no poet, but occasionally my verses were published in the wall newspaper at school. A sort of inspiration came upon me now and, taking my notebook out, I wrote down the words that were spontaneously shaping in my mind:

Beyond the plateau of Kurdai,
Untrodden in ages, there lies
The steppeland of Anarkhai,
Cruelly swept by the wind and snow,
Scorched by unbearable heat, but I know
That very soon will come a day,
I see it now, it's on its way,
When Anarkhai steppe will become
The loveliest country under the sun!

Never mind that the verse I had produced was inept and clumsy. What did worry me was that it did not express even a hundredth part of the feelings crowding my soul and violently seeking an outlet. I racked my brains, I was groping for those only words in which to tell of my dream as I felt it, and in that very moment someone rudely snatched the notebook from my hands. I started.

"Scribbling love letters, eh?" Abakir chuckled spitefully as he walked away

from me. "You want to get at the girl with your verses, eh?"

"Give it back!" I was infuriated. "You mustn't read others' letters!"

"Are *you* going to tell me what I must and must not do? I have my own rules, and you can go and jump in the lake."

I ran to the tractor and grabbed a spanner.

"Put that down!" Abakir held the notebook out to me. "Here, take your silly stuff." Suddenly he burst out laughing, and roared for all the steppe to hear. "The loveliest country, Anarkhai! Ha-ha-ha! What a fool you are, Academician! It's just saps like you who ought to be herded here to learn what's what. Gosh, lovely Anarkhai! What a laugh. It will yet show you a thing or two, this lovely Anarkhai. You'll sing a different tune if you stay here for the winter..."

"I'm not going to ask you whether I'm to stay or not! You'd better worry about yourself!"

"Why should I worry?" Abakir advanced upon me with a grim smile. "I never forget myself. I always get what's mine." He turned away from me, then paused, as though remembering something, and coming very close to me hissed in my face: "Throw any thoughts about her out of your head, Academician, or else..."

"We'll see about that!"

"I'm telling you, don't you dare even think about her!"

Suddenly I felt sorry for this bully who had a screw loose from hatred and spite, I said to him calmly:

"Look, you're a grown-up person. Occasionally you do talk reason, but more by accident than anything else. You should remember this: no one can forbid anyone to think, wish or dream. It's in their ability to think that humans differ from animals."

I don't know if he was impressed by my words, but anyway he made no rejoinder. He got into the cab with a glum look, and started it with an angry jerk. The engine caught on willingly. Well, we had to get down to work once more...

Thereafter I never parted with my dreams. I had won the right to dream, I had recovered my birth right, and I cherished my dreams.

That night, when everyone had gone to bed, I left the yurt and went to the spring. I wanted to be alone, and the spring drew me irresistibly.

The sky was not large enough for the stars, and so they slipped down to the very rim of the earth at the horizon. And yet, strangely, there was room for all of them to be reflected in the small circular pool which now seemed abysmally deep. As they glimmered and twinkled in the water, I fancied I could scoop them up with a dipper and scatter the sparkling gems on the ground all around. Where they were reflected in the brook, they flowed away with the water and broke into fragments on the stony floor. But where the water stood still and dreamy,

they shone as brightly as in the sky, and it occurred to me that this spring was like the soul of a man when it was full of radiant dreams, and was so capacious that it could take in all the surrounding world.

I sat there, looking, listening, taking in the dark, mysterious steppe with all my being, and transforming it in my dreams as I wished. Was there anyone to whom I could tell about my dreams? I can't explain it, but that girl, whose name I didn't know, seemed the very person I was looking for. She would understand me, she would share my emotions. Perhaps this was because we first met here, by this spring, and called it Camel's Eye.

Did she know that I was thinking about her? We would finish ploughing soon, and then I'd find her, bring her here, to the spring, and tell her all about the Land of Anarkhai. I would not read my verse to her, she might laugh. No, I'd tell her in plain, simple words just how I pictured the future of the Anarkhai steppe.

Before going, I took another look at the star-studded sky. Everything that was in sight gladdened the eye, everything save the bulky stone image looming darkly on the hillock. It stood there, as always, utterly indifferent to everything, staring stonily into the distance with its one lifeless eye.

The moon came out, and I noticed two shadows moving cautiously along the far side of the ploughed field. They were *djeirans*—steppeland deer. Where were they going? To their watering place, most probably. The *djeirans* came to the edge of the ploughed field and stopped in their tracks, afraid to step on the strangely broken-up ground that smelt of oil and iron. They stood there for a long time without stirring. The moonlight silvered the two—the deer with the short, branched antlers, and the doe, smaller in stature with her large eyes glistening in the darkness. She clung to her mate, while he held his graceful head high, all his senses on the alert. They stood thus, paralysed by fear and dismay: what had been happening to the steppe? Where was their old path? What elemental force could have played such havoc with once solid ground?

They did not venture to tread on the ploughed field. Soundlessly, they went back, carrying the melancholy silver moonglow on their pliant backs...

I stayed there a little longer, so as not to unnerve the *djeirans* further, and then went back to the yurt. I lay in bed for a long time with my eyes open.

Suddenly I heard whispering. Abakir and Kalipa were in bed together. Possibly, this had happened before too, but I didn't know it. Kalipa was whimpering and saying something, but I couldn't make out the words.

"Come on, stop it," Abakir muttered sleepily. "Look, we'll go to town and get everything fixed up. You'll stay in hospital for a couple of days and be as right as rain. It's nothing to break your heart about..."

"It's not *that* I'm breaking my heart about," Kalipa replied bitterly. "I

hate myself, I despise myself... How could I have fallen in love with a character like you? What did I see in you? I don't really know... Did you ever do anything for anyone? Never. And yet I got attached to you like a dog..."

"You won't regret it. As soon as we finish the job I'll take you away from here."

"Yes, I will regret it. I know that I'll be sorry all my life. And still I'll go with you. I don't want to remain alone..."

"Not so loud! Come closer. That's better, that's much better than weeping into your pillow."

I pulled the blanket over my ears. The whispering I had overheard made me sad, and I wished I could fall asleep quickly and hear no more.

5

The sun was getting hotter and hotter every day. Sorokin came to see how we were doing more often now. We had to hurry before the soil became parched. We had another five days of ploughing to do, and the sowing would take as long.

Sorokin told us that we'd do autumn ploughing too, for the first time, and that next year we'd get a lot of tractors and a tractor-repair station would be built here. Sorokin had everything lined up. He indefatigably circled the steppe, studying every hollow, every rise and drop, and knew it thoroughly down to the tiniest grain of sand.

It was high time the practice of delivering fodder here by truck and plane in severe winters was stopped. And Sorokin knew how to do it.

Abakir and I worked far into the night now. We slept in the field, and at sunrise got going once more. The work was so tough that Abakir left me alone. He simply ignored me, as if he did not notice me at all. But his deep-seated dislike for me still lurked in his sullen eyes. I didn't care. I did my job and dreamed my dreams. I lived for the day when I'd be free to go to the shepherds on the other side of the hill, and find the girl with the sweet bang.

We started ploughing a large new plot of ground. It's always a thrill to begin on something new in work which you love and from which you derive satisfaction. I remember in school I always loved starting a new line, or a new page. I loved running on the new snow early in the morning, and being the first to leave my footprints in it. In the spring, I loved going to the foothills and picking the first tulips on which no human glance had yet fallen. There is a peculiar fascination and excitement for me in novelty. And here, in Anarkhai, a new row to be ploughed on this virgin land was like that new line, that new snow, that first tulip.

I rejoiced watching the blades slice through the virgin soil. Polished to a truly blinding gleam, they dug into the thick of the earth, and very smoothly and easily turned up huge chunks of it.

There was a sudden flash of something under the end blade, as though a goldfish had appeared on the crest of the wave and, momentarily reflected in the mirror surface of the blade, quickly dived under again. I sprang down from the plough, and pulled a heavy piece of metal from the ground. It was so beautiful that I started waving my arms excitedly and shouted: "Gold! Gold!"

Abakir stopped the tractor at my shout, and jumped down from the cab.

"What's that you found?"

"Gold! Look, Abakir, it's gold!"

He started slowly, than hurried towards me. I held the beautiful piece of metal out to him in my palm.

"Let's see." He took my find and rubbed it on his sleeve. "How could there be gold here anyway?" He spoke in a husky voice, and turned pale as though he were suddenly gripped with fear. "Can't be." He forced a smile, digging the earth out of the notches with a finger-nail, and handed my find back to me with obvious reluctance.

"Why shouldn't there be gold here?" I wanted to know. "Look how heavy it is, must weigh all of eight-hundred grams. The Mongols lived here in the 12th century, and before coming to Anarkhai they invaded China and brought a lot of gold from there. That's how it could happen to be here!" I said this because I very badly wanted my find to turn out to be pure gold. Carried away, I talked on, convincing both myself and the completely dumbfounded Abakir. "You know for how many centuries it's lain in the ground? Any other metal would have rusted away, and this one hasn't because it's pure gold. Tribes of nomads once met in battle here, in Anarkhai. You can't imagine what bloody battles they fought. And in those days, the khans' swords had hammered-gold hilts. This piece here is actually one of those hilts. Here, grip it, and you'll see how nicely it fits the hand."

Abakir gripped it and weighed it in his hand.

"Maybe it isn't gold, but we've got to show it to people who know, just for curiosity's sake." He put my find in his pocket, and said: "Safer here. You might drop it, jogging on that plough."

"Oh, all right," I agreed.

Abakir went to his cab, patting his sagging pocket.

As we ploughed on, I was thinking how I'd take my find to my teacher Aldiarov, and make him a present of it. He had quite a collection of such objects. And, of course, he'd have something interesting to relate in connection with my find. The work was very tiring, and I soon forgot about my gold. What got

on my nerves was the uneven rhythm of the tractor. Abakir's driving was certainly strange that day: he now slowed down irresolutely, now started off with a jerk, deafening me with the sudden roar and smothering me with the black smoke which burst from the exhaust-pipe and wreathed the turned-up earth, the plough and the blades in a murky, smelly cloud.

This went on till the end of the day. The sun had set but it was still light. Abakir glanced at me over his shoulder several times as if he was in two minds about speaking to me. And now he stopped the machine.

"Come here," he waved to me.

I went to the cab. Abakir was pale, and his eyes were shifty. Wiping the sweat off his forehead, he said to me, trying to make himself heard above the noise of the engine:

"I couldn't yell loud enough. Look, go secure the levers, then come back and drive for a bit in my place, I'm not well, I feel sick, sort of. I'll go and take a walk, maybe it'll pass..."

"Sure, go on," I told him.

Abakir climbed down from the cab while I secured the levers. He had a washed-out look and seemed to have faded all at once. He shuffled away without speaking, and his shoulders drooping.

"He seems very sick. Must be his stomach, gripes or something," I said to myself as I put in the clutch and got the tractor moving.

I drove at a steady pace. Once again the machine was obedient to my will. Every time I had a chance to drive I anxiously tried to do my best. Now, I turned at the end of the field and started back. It was already dusk, and there was a cool breath of wind. I thought I'd make two more rounds and then switch on the headlights. I peered down the field before me and saw someone quickly walking away along the rise. When he got to the top, he ran down on the other side and vanished from view. I had seen only his back. It was Abakir. What was the matter with him, I wondered? Where was he off to? He must have seen something there. When I was halfway down the field, I poked my head out of the cab, rising on the seat, but I didn't see Abakir. Where could he have gone? He was so ill, too. Very strange. I stopped the tractor and decelerated the engine.

"Abakir!" I shouted. "Abakir!"

No response. Then I throttled down the engine, so it wouldn't drown out my voice, and yelled again: "Abakir! Where are you? Abakir, answer me!"

Not a sound came from the shadowy steppe.

What if he was taken really bad? I pictured him lying on the ground, all doubled up from pain, too sick to call back. I jumped down from the cab, and ran as fast as I could. From the shoulder of the rise I looked about me. No one there. Then I ran up to the top, and from there I saw Abakir walking away

across the plain. He had already gone a long way.

"Abakir, where are you off to?" I shouted again and again, but he did not turn round, and before long he vanished altogether.

I stood there irresolutely for a few minutes, and then turned back. The last of the sunset glow made paling patches in the sky, and a sombre darkness descended on the hills and valleys.

I felt disturbed and confused. The melancholy, mysterious silence felt strange and eerie. It was as if the steppe held its breath, listening to my footsteps, to my thoughts. And my thoughts were of Abakir. When I told him what wealth really lay in Anarkhai, he scoffed at me and called it a lot of rubbish. But when I told him a tall story about the gold, he lost his head. Oh no, he didn't. People like Abakir never lose their head. Obviously he had been planning to quit all along, he had actually talked about it, but only as a sort of threat for Sorokin. After all, he hated everyone here, he had had fights with everyone. But what about Kalipa? Why, she was his biggest reason for quitting. He had no use for her, pregnant and clinging. Still, he would not have run out on us a week before pay-day. However, he got paid yesterday, quite a lot too, he never left his money in the yurt and always carried it on him, so he could afford to go, having worked only one day for free. Besides, the find might turn out to be really gold...

Kalipa's voice broke into my thoughts.

"Abakir, Kemel, where are you?"

She had brought us two cans of water for the night.

"What happened to you two?" she asked me worriedly. "I got quite scared. Here was I waiting and waiting, the tractor was here, and you two were gone!"

What could I tell her? The truth was best.

"Abakir has gone away. He quit work."

"Gone?.. Why ... what for?" she faltered.

"I don't know".

I was ashamed for Abakir, so I did not tell her about the gold.

"So he's gone?" she asked again. Then she grabbed a can of water and dumped it on the ground. "Why do I cart this water then?" she asked in a small, lost voice, as though speaking to herself.

I carried the can to the radiator, and Kalipa pressed her face to the cab and wept bitterly.

I did not know how to comfort her.

"Maybe he'll come back yet," I mumbled.

"I'm not weeping for him," she sobbed, and angrily turned her tear-stained face to me. "I believed and I dreamed. Believed in what? Dreamed of what, I ask you?" she suddenly shouted with such desperate, ringing strength that even in the empty steppe her voice called a wailing echo. "I thought he was a hard-

working fellow, I thought his spite would go with time. I wanted to thaw out his heart with kindness and love. And he? Oh, what's the use... A horse is hard-working too, but with a man the soul comes first, that's why he's human... Then you find happiness in work, then there's purpose to everything. And he, he didn't understand anything. He never changed, and left with his spite and all. It hurts, if anyone knew how it hurts!"

I did not speak. I felt despondent and terribly sorry for Kalipa. But I could not understand her loving Abakir... If Abakir could know the value of the happiness he had lost today by rejecting Kalipa's love, he would howl like a wolf in a snowstorm, *he* would weep, not she.

Kalipa got into her cart and drove off without another word.

The Anarkhai steppe slept peacefully. A faintly audible train whistle sounded from far away, and the sound quavered and rolled through the wormwood. Perhaps Abakir was already on his way in a freight-car? Well, good riddance to the bastard. Anarkhai won't perish without you, and we'll manage too...

I didn't want to think of him any more. I had to get back to the job. It took me a long time to get the engine started, but at last it roared up making the darkness shudder with fright. I got into the cab and switched on the headlights.

The responsibility was mine alone now. And suddenly I wished I had that sweet girl beside me, and that she'd believe me when I told her that this wild, wormwood steppe would one day become a beautiful country called Anarkhai.

GRANT MATEVOSYAN

(b. 1935)

Soviet Armenian writer Grant Matevosyan was born into a peasant family in the village of Akhnidzor, located in the Alaverdi District of Armenia. He graduated from the Yerevan Teachers' Training College in 1962; his first work was published in 1959. In his early works he writes about the life and folklore of the mountainous land of shepherds who live according to the old traditions (the long stories *We and Our Mountains*, 1962; *The Orange Herd*, 1962). In the long stories *Alkho* (1965) and *She-Buffalo* (1968) he describes the world of animals which is for him a symbol of undistorted natural beauty. Folk traditions and simple work, expressed in the context of man's spiritual world, are sharply contrasted to mechanized civilization and urban standardization (the long story *Hangover*, 1969). The author values the qualities of patience, inner wholeness, diligence and adherence to the clan traditions, which are expressed with particular psychological force in the characters of old peasant women (the stories "The Living Land", 1973, and "Your Clan", 1975).

Matevosyan's prose is marked by expressive strength, philosophical symbols and a particular romantic humour in which peasant cunning is complemented by the author's thoughts on the problem of the personality in the modern world. Matevosyan's works have been translated into many languages.

Grant Matevosyan

Oddball

ODDBALL*

We had a Samad, a Madat and an Amrkhan** in the class, but we called Artavazd Oddball. I didn't know why we called him that then. Now I do. His brothers who were born before him had died for some reason, and the old women had advised his mother to give the next child an unusual, foreign name, something Turkish or Kurdish. As if death could be deceived, as if it would not know that an Armenian child was hiding under a foreign name. Anyway, it was decided to trick death and send it away empty-handed, so the desperate father and mother called their next child Artavazd, a Turkish or Kurdish name. Then they waited and watched. One day, a passer-by leaned against their wattle fence and asked his mother for a glass of water. After drinking it down, he predicted that the child in her arms would live a long life. The mother sighed and explained why the child had been named Artavazd. But the passer-by smiled and said it was not a foreign name but an ordinary Armenian one. The mother froze in horror, the father gasped and sank to the ground under the apple-tree. That was how it was.

While the name turned out to be Armenian, the child did not die. This was the Artavazd we called Turk or Oddball.

His mother was a cleaning woman in the library. She swept the floor, carried water, and dusted the books, putting them back on the shelves upside down because she did not know how to read. Once she took an old cloth banner from the library with the words DEATH TO THE NAZI INVADERS written in lime. She brought the bright red banner home, washed it and used it to make a shirt.

Oddball's father had a weak heart. He groaned and moaned but didn't die. He was the only man left in the village, and this troubled him. He would take an axe from one of our mothers to help her out, hit a log a few times, then grimace and reach for his heart. Thus, moaning, he lived, was a father to Oddball, and helped him do his homework, while our fathers fought at the front.

My hands were chapped and raw from the cold morning air. Somehow I managed to give hay to the cows, and pick up the pitchfork and clean our cattle-shed, but I had no strength left to hold a pen because my fingers hurt as soon as I picked it up. All our hands were chapped at the time, but I say *my* hands and *my* fingers, because I remember *my pain*. My body remembers only its own pain.

When Oddball came into the classroom in his new red shirt we all thought he was a girl. Then we realised it was Oddball, that he was wearing a red shirt and that all of us in the class were dressed in brown, because all our home-made woolen

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986
**Turkish names.

clothes were the same brown colour. We would go downriver, as far as the sawmill, and return with a bundle of oak bark: our mothers use it to dye the wool. We were all brown in the class, while Oddball had come dressed in a red shirt. For a second we all fell silent. We were struck by the fact that his father was moaning and not dying and his mother had stolen the red banner from the library to make her son a shirt. I swallowed and did not say his mother had stolen the banner.

"He's dressed like a girl," I said.

Lowering his eyelashes, which were indeed as long as a girl's, Oddball also swallowed and I saw his Adam's apple move up and down on his thin neck. I went and sat down at my seat so as not to say anything else about him. But his red shirt kept attracting attention.

"You're a banner," the children told him.

"A heroic banner," they said.

Then I heard Madat's dry voice:

"It's your father's heroic banner."

Oddball stood motionless, his eyes lowered, and did not move. The history teacher came in, and all the children went to their seats, while he remained standing in front of the whole class in his red shirt, his eyes down.

"Why don't you go to your seat?" the history teacher asked.

"He's wearing a red shirt," the children said.

"Yes, indeed," the teacher said.

Slowly, as if he were trudging through heavy mud—all our eyes were fixed on him—he walked to his place and sat down right in front of me.

"He's wearing a red shirt," everyone told the botany teacher.

"I see."

"The heroic banner of his father."

"No, it's the banner of your envy," the botany teacher said.

Despite all his mother's efforts, the white letters still stood out in some places. His mother had washed it with ashes, because there was no soap... I probably shouldn't have started to tell this story. Who knows, perhaps the time will come again when there won't be any soap and laundry will be washed with ashes as it was then. Afterwards you would be bathed in the same water. You don't know what it is like when there's no soap, how laundry is washed in ashes. You don't know what the itch is like, and you don't know why we went to the sawmill and brought back bundles of oakbark. You don't know what a louse is and can't understand why all our heads were shaved. And you will never understand the constant touch of rough wool clothes against the naked body; we couldn't take off and throw away the wool cover which dug into our skins and caused us constant discomfort. You don't know what war is and what a fine thing it is that you don't know all of this.

So Oddball sat right in front of me, and I stared at his red back, whether I wanted to or not. Despite all his mother's scrubbing and washing, the traces of glue and lime still remained on the red fabric. As I stared at his back I saw the outline of the letter L. Then I made out the letter A in front of it. At first I mistook the letter for the number 1 but then I realised it was a capital L. I began to look for other letters and found half of a D further over on his lean shoulder. He probably felt my stare, because he shivered and tried to make himself small. I felt ashamed and decided I wouldn't look at his back which had grown small, his lean shoulders, his thin neck or the back of his head, but at this point I clearly saw the letter O—ODDBALL.

"Oddball," I said to myself. "Oddball," I muttered in a scarcely audible whisper, both saying it and not saying it at the same time.

"Oddball is wearing a red shirt," the class told the geography teacher.

"You'll all wear shirts like that when the war ends," the teacher said.

"Oddball has the word *oddball* written on his back," I said to myself, because I didn't want to say it aloud.

Madat and I had a fight during the recess. It was not a real fight but still it was a fight, because Madat sat on top of me and tried to put a dirty snowball into my mouth. I clenched my teeth and kept turning my head, and this made him mad and he became even more determined to put the dirty snowball into my mouth. It was not enough for him to be sitting on top of me—it was not a complete victory—so he did everything he could to shove the dirty snowball into my mouth and flew into a rage because he couldn't.

Then the military training teacher came.

We all lined up, turned our faces to the left and stood still, as she watched, her eyes fixed on us. We stood stiffly erect and the excitement of the break gradually left our faces, laughter and jokes died down. Voices grew silent, smiles disappeared, and a very serious and slightly frightened line of pale boys and girls was left standing in the yard. The teacher's brother had been killed at the front, and all of us felt that we were somewhat to blame. Though we respected her, we were afraid of her, because every time she looked at us, it seemed that we had killed her brother. From week to week, from lesson to lesson, and even in the course of a day, an hour, from mathematics to military training, the strict expression on her face became even stricter, harder, and we understood that her brother had been the best person in the world for her, understood how much they had loved each other and how great was her sorrow.

I swallowed and thought how wonderful it would be if, instead of my illiterate mother, she were my mother. Then I wouldn't be afraid of mathematics or military training.

"What did you say?" she said softly.

"I only swallowed and thought ... nothing," I sighed weakly, pulled myself together and stood still, sorry that I had wished she were my mother a minute ago.

The girls left the ranks, which meant she had whispered or merely looked at them, but looked in such a way that the girls had understood they were to leave the ranks. In this muddy grey interval between winter and spring, the girls wore red, orange and green dresses. They gathered together in a joyful bunch and looked at our brown ranks with a bit of disdain and a bit of love. I still remember that common expression in their bright eyes. It was a common expression because when girls gather into a bunch and look at you simultaneously, they have a remarkable look—it's not a look but an aroma, the aroma of stars, or daisies or some other flowers, because it is pure and the girls look at you with a bit of disdain and a bit of love.

She frowned, and the rank of boys closed.

She slowly raised her face and her serious green eyes scanned our ranks. We understood. For a second we remained silent, then a dry voice, like a stone hitting a stone, rang out:

"First!"

"Second!" I threw my number to the boy to my left. From the corner of my eye I noted that the ranks were brown—only one red shirt stood out at the end.

"Eighth!"

"Ninth!"

"Tenth!"

"Eleventh!"

"Twelfth!"

Is that all? No.

"Thir..." Oddball's shy voice was heard. Something like a smile twinkled in the girls' eyes, and the teacher scanned the ranks with her severe green eyes again. There was absolute silence. I could hear my heart beat and could even hear what number one was thinking about number thirteen. It seemed to me that the beating of my heart was the beating of number one's heart and he was thinking the same thing I was thinking about number thirteen.

"Hurrah!" A cry rang out far away on High Hill, and the echo of the eighth formers rolled throughout the Big Valley.

They were undergoing command training. From far away their guns seemed real and their voices merged into a powerful roar. It was as if a real battle was in progress on High Hill which extended through the whole Big Valley to Snowdrop Hill. We couldn't see the eighth formers themselves, we only saw the snow-covered hill, heard their voices merging in a general din, and guessed that they had scattered throughout Big Valley and were attacking Snowdrop Hill.

But Snowdrop Hill remained silent. I strained so hard to see there were tears in my eyes. But Snowdrop Hill was impassively white and nothing moved, and we all wondered, if the enemy was in white. We stared hard. But it turned out the enemy had come up from the rear, from the same High Hill, and was quickly approaching. The eighth formers were yelling hurrah, their brave cry filled their ears, and they did not realise what a ridiculous hurrah it was.

A look of disgust appeared on our teacher's face because the eighth formers were so foolish and short-sighted.

"Attention! Count off!" she ordered coldly, as if we were the naive and silly eighth formers attacking the empty hill.

I heard a dry sound, as if a stone were hitting a stone:

"First!"

"Second!" I threw my number to the boy on my left.

"Third!"

Now she would divide us into two groups, even numbers in one, odd numbers in the other. Interesting, would Oddball be odd or even? Hope he'll be odd. "Thirteenth," his shy voice was heard.

"Fourteenth!"

However, all of them were her pupils—both the defeated eighth formers and the victorious seventh formers whose voices merged into a general din in the Big Valley—and number one, Madat, was the son of her brother who had died. And Oddball's voice was frightened, and the noise in the Big Valley suddenly died down, and we probably resembled medieval European knights in our tight home-made trousers, and the seventh and eighth formers had probably tumbled on each other in exhaustion and were eating snow. All this (or maybe she had seen the letter O on Oddball's back?) brought a weak, almost imperceptible smile to the teacher's face. I thought once again that it would be fine if she were my mother. That was how it was with us: her half smiles meant more to us than our mothers feeding, bathing and dressing us.

"Two groups!"

We even numbers in our peasant sandals, took three soft steps forward and one to the side. And I felt I liked being first, even in such a small group of seven boys.

"The first group to Warm Spring, on the double! There's a pussy willow in blossom at the spring. Each of you are to break off a little branch and return with it. Repeat the order!"

My heart throbbed. This was because I wanted to run and because the bright eyes of the girls were looking at us, and also because soft, yellowish-green spring was approaching.

"I don't want Oddball in my group," Madat said in his dry voice resembling a stone hitting a stone. It was an incredibly dry voice. The teacher looked up slowly and said softly, more with her eyes:

"What ball?"

Everyone turned and looked at Oddball. He stood at attention, but it seemed to me that he was huddled up because he was nicknamed Oddball, because his father was moaning and not dying and his mother had stolen the red cotton and because he was like a scarecrow in his red shirt. Everyone looked at him and so did the teacher. She was looking at him and waiting to see what her brother's son would say.

"Oddball Arto," mumbled Madat.

"What Arto?" She wanted her brother's son to say Oddball's real name in full and clearly, and it was the perfect time to add: "If his name weren't Oddball, it wouldn't be written on his back." The joke would be the most sharp-witted in the school, and would be remembered for a long time, a whole year. But at that moment—when I was the captain of a whole team and the girls gathered in a

bunch were looking at us and yellowish-grean spring was approaching—I was fond of Oddball so I remained silent.

"Artavazd," muttered Madat. He didn't like being forced to say the name.

"Artavazd," he said dryly, as if a stone were scrapping against another stone. "Yes, Artavazd, but even if he's thrice Artavazd, I don't want him on my team."

The teacher looked at him in silence. It was an angry look, and while she didn't say anything, we all understood very well what she wanted to say. She wanted to say that now she wasn't Madat's aunt, but the mathematics and military training teacher.

Madat was uncomfortable, but continued to look the teacher straight in the eye: after all she was his aunt, and Madat was a brave lad.

"Take him off my team," Madat spoke more respectfully.

"Excuse me," the teacher said with a short laugh, "but who told you you're the captain of the team?"

Madat looked at the team and the team looked at him, and it was clear that he was their leader. He stared back at the teacher and while he did not say: I did. He didn't apologise or say excuse me either. The teacher looked at him and he looked at the teacher, and no one could have gotten a word of apology from him by any means. The teacher realised that he was indeed the leader and that he did not want Oddball on his team.

The teacher closed her eyes slowly and stood with her head high for several seconds. When she raised her heavy eyelids, there were tears in her eyes, and she was merely an aunt who recognised her dead brother in the boy Madat. We all understood this because he was a leader and our hero at that moment. He was a good captain, and wanted to have a team on which each boy could run well. And she was a good teacher, and wanted to retain her love for all of us and for each individually, and observe military discipline at the same time. How could it be that I was good, he was good, you were good, we were all good, but bad things still happened?

Oddball was looking at the distant mountains with his head to one side and his big eyes shining and it seemed that he was not even breathing. "He can't run, he'll lag behind along the way," I heard Madat say. Oddball blinked. He only blinked. "Let him stay here with the girls," I heard. Oddball stood motionless, waiting. Only a lamb allows itself to be led to the slaughter, only water allows people to praise or curse its taste, only a bright sunflower waits to be picked or left on its stem. The red glimmer of his shirt made Oddball seem unusually flushed. He stood silently in his shirt with our eyes fixed on him, listening to the argument about his uselessness, and all of a sudden it seemed to me that he was better than anyone else, better than the teacher, or brave Madat, or the girls. And then I felt I was the worst, the meanest of them all because I allowed them to

discuss him in this way. I permitted it and was even searching for letters on his back. He swallowed, his thin neck grew tense, and I felt that it was close and I couldn't breathe, that I was breathless instead of him. I was choking because my father was moaning and not dying, because my mother was given an old banner and it was like stealing, because the word "Oddball" happened to be on my back, and because in this strong world only I lacked strength.

"Let Madat and I switch places," I said.

The teacher pretended not to hear me.

"Let Madat..."

The teacher glanced at me, "If you don't want to, then..." I thought, but immediately realised that she was demanding military discipline from me and observation of the rules.

"Permit me," I said stepping forward. I came to attention. "Order Madat to transfer to the second team and me to the first."

"What did you say?" she said softly.

"Order me to transfer to the first team and transfer Madat to the second," I repeated. "Since you don't want Artavazd in you team, let's exchange teams," I told Madat.

He looked at me without seeing me and turned away. I was at a loss. I realised why he was so cold and became even more upset. His team consisted mostly of tall boys, while mine were all short. Madat himself was tall, much taller than I, and I had proposed that he become leader of the shorties. He was truly a good general. Hannibal, I thought, Suvorov, Kutuzov, and Gasan-khan. I would call him Gasan-khan. But he already had his own name—Madatov. General Madatov. That's how it'll be, we'll call you General Madatov, then you'll see...

"We won't change anything," said the teacher. "The first detachment to Warm Springs, on the double!"

"No, take Oddball out of my detachment," said he in a very dry voice.

"What ball?" the teacher shouted.

"You know," he said.

"Who told you the detachment is yours?" the teacher shouted.

"It is," he said.

"And if I throw you into the cellar and close the door behind you?" the teacher shouted.

For a minute he stood motionless. Then he left the ranks and walked towards the cellar.

"Come back!" the teacher shouted.

He didn't even look back. "Throw me into the cellar and close the door behind me," came his voice. He was moving further away from us and down, he was already going down the stairway into the cellar, half of him was lost in the

cellar darkness. This was how his father the teacher's brother had gone to his death, not to return, never to return.

"Come back," the teacher begged.

He was standing on the stairway, we could only see his head, he had not looked back once. Would he go down or would he return? He would not return, not for anything in the world. We could only see his head. His aunt turned away so as not to see him disappear, not to see the darkness swallow him completely.

"It's all because of you," I heard.

Everyone looked reproachfully at Oddball. Now when everyone was looking at him he no longer dared to stand indifferently, looking into the distance and thinking he was not to blame: he now shrank as if he were the most guilty person in the world and was even afraid of making his pitiful protest, was even afraid that we would see the Adam's apple moving on his neck. Madat had already turned and was coming up the steps—slowly ascending to return to his general's duties. I strongly disliked him. And now when everyone was looking reproachfully at Oddball, and he considered himself guilty, only because I now disliked Madat, I suddenly realised that Oddball was not to blame and that if a rabbit loses his nerve before a hunting dog it doesn't mean the rabbit is to blame.

With no feelings of repentance, no pricks of conscience, Madat returned and took his place proudly at the head of the detachment.

"Please take him out of my group," he said calmly.

"Why?"

"He can't run."

"No, he can't," said the teacher.

"Then take him out. He can't keep up with us. We don't want to lose because of him."

That was true, but I couldn't, and still can't understand, how you can stand before a person and tell him that he is weak, that he has wobbly knees, that he is no good at a particular thing.

"He can't run fast like you can, and you can't run slowly because of him. I understand, but what should I do with him?" the teacher said.

Madat didn't answer, he cast a commander's glance at his group and looked at Oddball with a look that almost ordered him to leave the ranks, and I didn't like it.

"Do you still insist?" asked the teacher. I didn't like what she said either. It seemed she was pleased that Madat had his own opinion and was insisting. The teacher turned to me: "And you? What do you think?"

The wind was blowing somewhere, an eagle was soaring in the sky, a small waterfall was splashing from the rocks, and a calf was standing nearby: what could be easier and more wonderful than running? I was about to say "take my

number seven and give me Artavazd instead", and had even opened my mouth to say it, when suddenly I realised that was what Madat wanted. And he was not even hiding his desire. His look and his whole appearance shamelessly declared that he would defeat me, that his detachment would defeat mine, and just as he had pushed the dirty snowball into my mouth in the morning, he would force his worst runner on me.

"I don't know."

"Should I transfer Artavazd to your team?"

"Why should you?" I grumbled. "Let us remain as we were."

"Attention! You're not at home and I'm not your mother," she said in an almost inaudible voice.

"And not my aunt," I said to myself, although I was terribly afraid of mathematics and knew that she wanted a more intelligible answer from me.

"He can't run," I said.

Of course it was mean of me, but how could I be honest and revengeful at the same time? I had to take revenge on Madat at any cost.

"A minute ago you were ready to take him," the teacher said.

How could I explain why I had been ready to take him a minute ago and now was not.

"Now I'm not," I said.

"Why?"

"No reason," I said, and didn't like myself at all. It is a difficult thing to be unloved, and I looked away.

The tired seventh and eighth formers were returning along the road, the former as victors and the latter as the defeated. They all seemed dull and dejected. They hunched over, dragging the wooden rifles along. Some of them bent down, took a handful of snow and ate it feverishly. They were too tired to talk. Every one of them could have fallen down in the snow and gone to sleep immediately.

"If you want, you can transfer Artavazd to my team," I said.

"So you agree?" the teacher asked.

I hung my head.

"Why do you agree again now?"

"He agrees and that's it," said Madat.

"No one asked you, keep silent. Why do you agree?"

"I agree because what can be easier than running?"

She looked at me sadly and thoughtfully:

"Indeed, what can be easier..." she said, almost inaudibly.

The rain falls, the wind blows somewhere, a kite soars, dandelion seeds dance in the air, everything flies off somewhere and disappears.

"Artavazd, change places with the last boy in that group," she said sadly.

Our feet in soft sandals made some noise, but Oddball changed places with the boy in my group so noiselessly I thought he hadn't heard the teacher's command. I turned to tell him—yes, you can come, I'm inviting you—but he was already standing with my team.

"The first detachment, to Warm Spring, to the pussy willow, on the double, each of you break off a little branch and return. The second detachment..."

While she was inventing a mission for us, Madat's group crossed the gulley and Lonely Oak Tree Hill. My knees knocked. If she ordered us to run along the same road, I would catch up and pass them in a minute, in one minute.

"Second detachment, to the sawmill, on the double! Each of you bring a handful of sawdust."

I was still thinking how much I wanted to run to the pussy willow, and couldn't switch over and remember the way to the sawmill.

"Repeat the order!"

Before repeating the order I had to understand it. I looked at her blankly, like a fool.

"Sawdust?" I asked.

"Sawdust."

I still understood nothing. But it was not really my fault: the girls were standing not far away and we were supposed to bring everything for them. Madat's group was to bring pussy willow branches, and mine—sawdust?

"Sawdust?" I asked.

"Second group, get ready!" she ordered. "To the sawmill and back, on the double! Each of you is to bring a handful of sawdust. Repeat the order!"

It seemed to me that we would have to haul back oak bark, and would return all bruised and exhausted, and the wounds and bruises on our skin would burn from the sweat.

"Yes, Ma'am! To the sawmill and back on the double! May we carry out the order?"

"Each of you is to bring back a handful of sawdust."

"Yes," said I.

"Repeat the order."

To tell the truth, it was like being tortured, as if my mouth were being filled with sawdust. I repeated the order with displeasure:

"Each of us is to bring back a handful of sawdust."

"That's right. Go!"

We surged forward. We were flying. But then someone called my name, someone was preventing me from running, someone was ruining the fun. I turned back to the teacher, insulted now not only because of the sawdust. She was walking towards me and looking me in the eye intently.

"You shouldn't strain yourselves and run too fast," she said quietly.

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"It's not an order," she said and smiled. "Don't strain yourself, do you hear? Take your time going to the sawmill and coming back. Don't hurry."

"Madat's group ran very fast."

"They're one thing, you're another. Don't hurry," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am!" I took a short cut across the school garden through deep snow, jumped over the fence and caught up with the others.

"Boys..." I wanted to tell them who General Madatov was and why I had decided to call Madat Madatov, but the moment I reached them Oddball suddenly crashed to the ground. He had not slipped, there was no ice. He had simply tripped over his own feet and fallen. I was about to become angry, but he lowered his head guiltily and did not move.

"It's all right, does it hurt?" I asked.

"Of course it doesn't," the boys laughed.

"There was no ice under you, you didn't slip," I said.

"There was no ice, I didn't slip," he said quietly in voice like an ant's.

"Don't talk, breathe through your nose," I said.

"I'm breathing through my nose," he said in the same ant voice—I mean ants must talk to each other in such voices.

"What can be easier than running?" I said.

"I'll run in just a second," he whispered.

"I know you will, only breathe through your nose. If you don't breathe through your nose, your throat will be parched and you'll have a bitter taste in your mouth."

"It's not bitter ... in my mouth," he whispered.

We reached the path going along the river and I ran so fast the wind whistled in my ears. Oddball's red shirt appeared and disappeared, somewhere behind me. I watched him from the corner of my eye. For a while I saw a red spot over my shoulder, then it was gone. I realised he was straining, doing everything he could to pass me or at least keep up with me. I saw his tense face and tightly clenched teeth. He was really trying, but I liked being ahead, at least two steps, at least half a step, but ahead.

"Hey, boy! Hey, what are you doing?" I heard someone shout. It was the cracked, grating voice of an old man and it belonged to Biting Grandpa Sargis, my grandfather's brother. He had driven his skinny, weak cow to the river to bathe. Grandpa Sargis held it by the tail so it wouldn't fall, or perhaps he held the tail so as not to fall himself. He laughed and said: "Where you running like that? Germany'll piss in its pants." Grandpa blocked my way with his stick and grabbed my shoulder. I stopped because if I had wrestled free he would have fall-

en, he was so weak. Grandpa Sargis tried to nibble my ear or cheek but it was not easy because I was lean and he had only one tooth in his mouth. "Biting Grandpa's not what he used to be, can't even bite his grandson," he said in his grating voice. I slipped out of his bony embrace. But all the while I had the feeling of being loved. I felt that this was Biting Grandpa Sargis' way of showing that he cared. I remember the touch of his soft beard on my face, and his crackling, grating voice in my ears, I remember all of him. He referred to himself the way we children did, as Biting Grandpa. I caught up with my detachment near the big *khachkar*,* ran next to Oddball for a while and then began to leave him behind. But he didn't want to lag behind, he wanted to run with me. Pushing his puny chest out, he surged forward as you do on sprints, his face set and his teeth clenched. But still he lagged behind, far behind, and again I could see his red shirt over my shoulder from the corner of my eye.

Now I was in the midst of the group. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. My body was filled with elation, my heart was overjoyed, and I wanted to scream and yell. I needed to run just as winged creatures need to fly. I could run even faster, I could run so fast that I would soar off the ground. Whooping I passed someone. The boy who was ahead turned at my cry. I caught up with him and we ran shoulder to shoulder. "Sorry I have to pass you." I ran faster, faster and faster, and I thought I had already passed him ... tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap... I told myself that I was hearing his steps from behind, but no, we were running shoulder to shoulder and he was even a bit ahead of me. All of a sudden, his back began to move away from me centimetre by centimetre. He was one of my team, I couldn't allow him to pass me. I concentrated my energy and surged forward. I ran as one runs the last two or three metres of a sprint—bent over and straining forward. I felt I was about to burst, come apart at the seams, but the boy in front inexorably moved further away. And it seemed that not he but I was moving away, that someone else was straining, someone like Artavazd, for instance, and his heart was about to burst in my chest.

I slowed down. The detachment commander could run last, to make sure no one gets lost along the way. I let one, another, a third, a fourth pass me. I let the red shirt reach me.

"How are you doing?" I asked him.

"Fine," he gasped.

"We're supposed to bring a handful of sawdust," I said.

"A handful of sawdust," he repeated.

"Do you feel bad?" I asked.

"It's all right when we're running together," he whispered, after a pause.

******Khachkar*—a memorial stone cross in Armenia.

"Do you think we've run halfway?" I asked him.

"There's a little bit left," he gasped.

"A little bit? Don't you know where the sawmill is?"

"Once my mother sent me to get some oak bark, but my father wouldn't let me go," he said.

"I don't think we've even gone halfway," I said.

"I told you ... there's just a little bit left ... we'll be there in a jiffy," he gasped.

"No, we've still got a long way to go," and then it dawned on me: "What's the matter, do you feel bad?"

His throat must have been parched, he gasped for air and whispered:

"When we're together..."

"I called Madat General Madatov," I said. "Let's go a bit faster." At this point I felt I wanted to say something very important and exciting but forgot what it was. He caught up with me and I realised what it was: "We'll always be together," I said.

However, that was impossible. I slowed down and he slowed down, I began to run faster and he lagged. I often had to restrain myself. The boys had gone over Short Oak Hill. I realised that no matter how much I slowed down, he would also slow down, until we stopped completely. The waterfall was running from the rocks, the eagle was soaring in the sky, the wind was blowing from one end of the field to the other, everything was moving and rejoicing, the snow was sparkling in the sun ... but Grandpa Sargis and his cow were barely alive.

"What happened? I can't see anything," he gasped.

"What about the snow and the sun?"

"What sun?"

"Narrow your eyes."

He flung back his handsome head and ran with his face to the sun.

"Are you playing blind-man's buff?" I said.

He caught up with me.

"There's just a little bit left, isn't there?" he asked.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh-!" I heard.

Some women sat by the road on the rocks—our mothers were sitting there watching us, their faces red like flowers.

"Why does that girl make the children suffer?" they said.

The women had been suffering too. One of them still wore a gas-mask. They had just come from training and their faces were red from the masks—usually they were paler than ours.

"We're running to get sawdust," I cried out as I ran.

"Here's some sawdust, go back," one of them said.

We left the women behind.

"Damn her sawdust, doesn't she feel sorry for the children?"

But they were the ones to pity, not us, they would have to give us hot baths, rub our backs, dry us with towels and put us to bed.

"Close your mouth and breathe through your nose," I said.

He obeyed me, but when I turned back again his mouth was open like the mouth of a fish on dry land.

"Breathe through your nose."

"When I breathe through my nose, the air..." he gasped.

"The air what?"

"It burns," he said. He caught up with me, knocked against my shoulder and fell back again.

"Your shirt should be washed," I said.

"It was washed, the letters don't come off..."

"We'll call Madat Oddball... I mean we'll call Madat General Madatov," I said.

"It's hard for them now. They have to go uphill. They've stopped and are resting," he said.

"Yes, and it'll be hard for us on the way back."

"It's hard for them now," he whispered.

"They'll return with pussy willow."

"It's very hard for them now. Madat feels sick," he whispered.

"Do you feel sick? Tell me, do you feel sick?"

"We're running on even ground, and they're running uphill," he continued.

"They're returning now, returning with pussy willow, and we'll return with sawdust," I said.

"We'll return ... with sawdust..."

"Do you know why we have to bring sawdust?"

"No, the teacher told us to," he said.

"The sawdust is so she knows we reached the sawmill. We must reach the sawmill no matter what. That's why they have to bring pussy willow too."

"It's hard for them to breathe. Madat feels sick now," he said. He caught up with me, his head thumped against my shoulder as if he wanted to take hold of me, but he slowed down again.

"Why didn't you take the sawdust from the women? Listen, go back, take the sawdust, sit down and wait for us, we'll be back soon," I said.

He was swept off to one side, far off the road, but he returned and caught up with me again.

"Go back, take the sawdust, sit down and wait for us. Do you hear?"

It seemed as if someone else inside him were running, someone who did not obey him. That other person was pushing him, leading him off the road, but he resisted, overcame the other person and returned.

"Stop," I said. I stopped and turned towards him: he stood swaying, and slowly raised his handsome head. His eyes were red. "Go back, take the sawdust from the women and wait for us."

He looked dully at me like a sick calf, unable to understand what I wanted from him and wondering why I wouldn't let him die in peace.

"I can't hear anything, like underwater," he whispered.

I waited for him to come to his senses, but he still swayed and looked at me blankly. Then I turned him around and pushed him towards the village. He didn't object. He didn't say anything and seemed willing to go back.

"Are we going to the school?" he asked.

"You go alone, I'll run to the sawmill and return with the boys."

"You'll all run," he whispered.

I was so upset I felt like crying.

"I've fallen behind, I'm late because of you," I said.

"You'll all go there, and you too..." his face was puckered and tears filled his eyes.

"I'm the one who should be crying, what are you whimpering for?" I exploded.

"Let's go back together, you and I, together," he whispered softly, the way fish probably talk underwater.

"Why should I go back, I can run!"

"You'll all run..."

"What am I, your mother or father? Why are you complaining to me? Go home and cry!" I was pushing him towards the village while he whispered:

"We'll go back together, the two of us, you and I..."

"Are you afraid of going alone or what? There are no wolves on the road, no one will eat you, go!"

"No, I'm not afraid!" he answered curtly.

"What's the reason then?" I repeated.

"They'll say ... they'll say..." he lowered his eyes.

"What'll they say?"

"They'll say that everyone ran to the place, except Oddball who returned after going halfway. Everyone, everyone will run there, only I..." he whispered.

"What do you want..." my voice trailed off. I did not want to burst out crying. He was right. He was right but I had been delayed for too long as it was, I didn't have another second to waste, and because I couldn't think of anything else, I pushed him hard, with all my strength: "You can go to the devil..."

He fell and I began to run.

"Sit there and I'll bring you some sawdust," I shouted to him over my shoulder.

But he got up and walked towards me swaying. I decided to wait for him to

come up very close to me—then I would beat him up. But he didn't reach me: his legs suddenly gave way and he fell to the ground.

"You scarecrow!" I shouted at him.

He tried to rise. He got up on all fours but couldn't stand. He lifted his handsome head and looked at me. That was how I remembered him.

I ran. I was afraid of looking back and seeing his wobbly steps, seeing him fall. I was moving away from him and telling myself that I was running heavily because I was running alone. I was deceiving myself because I was not running heavily, in fact you could say I was flying and the wind was whistling in my ears. I felt something unpleasant had happened and hoped that running would take me further away from the unpleasant event. Faster, faster, faster, I said to myself. Faster, the teacher entrusted the detachment to you. You must run to the sawmill. Faster, faster, faster. Something unpleasant had happened. But I had to run further away from the unpleasant event. If you can't run, don't run. I slowed down. I slowed down to go back, but regretted the distance I had run, and I told myself that I had slowed down because the hill had started. I went up the hill and down the other side, trying not to trip. The road swept me along but nevertheless it became more and more difficult for me to run.

I am telling you the story of my guilty conscience. Twenty-five years have passed. The judge asks the criminal which sentence he prefers: twenty-five years in prison or death. The criminal thinks and then answers: "Death or twenty-five years? Aren't they the same thing?" I didn't commit a crime, and no one asked me such a question at a trial. I simply want to say that twenty-five years is a span of time equal to death, that everything can change, age and die in that time. Your old strict teacher screws up her eyes, looks at you and says: "No, I don't remember you. Excuse me, I don't see very well and I forgot my eyeglasses. No, I don't remember." And you peer into the faces of women and cannot understand how once you said that those extinguished eyes "shone". Life sparkled in these eyes for one day and then appeared in other eyes. Everything grows dim and changes ... but what happens in childhood, what you yourself did does not change and is never forgotten. And if it so happened that you were running with a group as a child, the patter of children's feet will always live within you... And if you gave up a friend for sawdust... Yes, if you chose sawdust over a friend, if you left him on the ground, on all fours, looking in your stead, alone, do not think that once you've gone up the hill it will be easier for you to run, do not think that if you refuse to look back and do not see him again, do not see him raising his head to look at you, that you will forget all that. You will always see him even if you do not turn back, you will run quickly but running will be difficult and pointless. And your conscience will always bother you and you will never be at peace.

They were bringing planks from the sawmill on waggons. I ran off the road to

let the last waggon pass and cheered up a bit. Old Avak from Badalov was the driver.

"Grandpa Avak, Darnents Arsen's grandson could not run with us and stopped halfway. Persuade him to go back with you to the village," I said.

"And whose son are you?" he asked.

He was so old he probably did not know my father.

"I'm Grandpa Avetik's grandson," I said.

The planks were fresh and heavy, and Grandpa Avak's team of oxen could hardly pull the waggon. A wheel rolled up against a stone and the waggon stopped.

"You son of a bitch," he said and lashed the ox. "You've abandoned a friend halfway and want me to take him home?"

The ox pulled, the wheel went over the stone, and the waggon moved on.

The waggon was gone and the road was open, but I couldn't move. The sound of my heart was muffled and I seemed to be enveloped by a deep silence. Tree trunks and stumps stood immobile, the snow sparkled slightly, I felt the presence of something familiar. It seemed I had a bundle of oak bark on my back and was standing deep in the snow under the weight of the load. I was engulfed in the snow and engulfed in myself. I heard a driver lash an ox far down the road: an ox strained somewhere, a wheel was not turning, and oxen were pulling and shifting their feet. Things were happening in the world, and I was standing there in the middle of an empty field totally useless. I came out on the road and realised that I had been smelling the odour of fresh planks and sawdust, and that was why I felt I had a bundle of oak bark on my back.

I was running again, but at first I didn't know where I was running. I was running to the sawmill of course. I told myself that I was running to the sawmill, but for some reason it seemed I was running to the village and Artavazd was lying on the road in front of me and raising his dull eyes to look at me. But no, I was not running to the village but to the sawmill, running to get a handful of sawdust. The dark figures of the other boys appeared on the path near the sawmill. I could take a shortcut through the snow, cross the frozen river and reach the sawmill much sooner than they, but I wanted to catch up with them and lose myself among them, become one of them. I caught up with them near the sawmill and we began to run together.

"Where's Oddball? Couldn't run?" they asked me.

"No," I said not daring to say "you're Oddballs yourselves."

I bent down and picked up two handfuls of sawdust—one for Artavazd and the other for myself. I thought I would give Artavazd the sawdust by stretching out my hand as if to shake hands, saying: I brought this for you. Take it, it's yours.

"How many handfuls did you take?" I asked one of the boys.

"One, how many should I take?"

"Didn't you get some sawdust for Artavazd?"

"For Artavazd?"

"Artavazd fell behind, didn't you get some for him?"

"Wouldn't even think of it!"

"But he fell behind," I said.

"I didn't take any sawdust for him!"

"But I did. I'll give it to you and you pass it on to him."

"Why should I? You took it, so you give it to him."

I couldn't explain why it was difficult for me to offer Artavazd my hand, because I couldn't explain it to myself either. I didn't know then why I had no right to offer my hand to him like a brother.

"I wonder where Madat and his boys are," I said.

"They're probably headed back too."

"Must be near the pussy willow."

"Each of them is to bring a little branch," I said. "Listen, I'll give you Artavazd's sawdust, you pass it on to him."

"You took it, you give it to him."

"Will it kill you if you give him the sawdust?" I asked.

"Will it kill *you*?"

"Let's run slower, they're only at the pussy willow," I said.

"They're on their way back or maybe they've returned already."

"Of course, Artavazd is not in their group," I said.

"And not in ours either."

"Maybe Grandpa Avak took him along. Let's run slower," I said.

"If you can't run, don't," they told me.

I didn't realise right away that their words were addressed to me.

"Who, me? Just try to keep up with me."

I gathered all my energy and was about to repeat: keep up with me, but despite all my efforts I was unable to break away from them. I felt as empty inside as you feel when someone asks you a rule of Sanskrit grammar. That was how empty I felt, and the emptiness prevented me from really mustering my strength. "Who was a whole hour behind because of Artavazd and then caught up?" I asked.

"You," they answered.

"Yes, me."

That's true, they told me. You lagged behind because of Artavazd, but you caught up with us at the sawmill. Artavazd didn't catch up but you did. Yes, I caught up. The two of you fell behind, and then you caught up and Artavazd didn't. Is it my fault he couldn't run any further? No one's blaming you. I'm not

to blame. You're not to blame. On the contrary, I'm bringing sawdust for him. What for? To give to him. What for? I took it for him. Took what for him? Sawdust, I shouted, sawdust, sawdust! I took some sawdust for him, let's run slower... And who fell behind because of Biting Grandpa Sargis, I said, who fell behind and then caught up with you, who?

They didn't answer.

"At first because of Biting Grandpa..."

They didn't hear me. They were far away and moving still further away. They seemed to be marking time, it seemed like a parody on running, and it also seemed that without really pushing, without straining, only by trying a bit, I could catch up with them. I couldn't believe that I had such an empty feeling inside which wouldn't let me run and that they were running in the real way... They were moving further and further away from me and life and joy were receding together with them, and the pleasure of running, and the quick look in the girls' bright eyes, a slightly derisive yet joyful look. I envied them terribly and hated their stubborn, lifeless, but persistent movement. My useless existence was linked to their strong group only by envy.

"All right," I whispered to them. "Go ahead and leave me alone."

Yet their backs were indifferent, while not running faster or slower, they inexorably moved away from me, and when I next lifted my eyes they were no longer there, only the empty road and the snow. I stopped.

So they've gone.

All of a sudden I realised that I was not bound to them by anything—not by envy, not by the desire to be first, and it was better that way. I was there and the road, and the snow, and the silence all around. I was standing all alone, my own master, amid the silent snow on the deserted road. I could lie down, if I wanted to. I could turn off the road and take my worthless self to a place I was not supposed to go at all—I didn't even know where myself.

I don't know how it happened but I suddenly noticed that I was running again. I was not lying and sleeping, but running. There was snow all around, and it seemed I was running in the midst of the same snow on the same place. From time to time I seemed to come to my senses and look back, but again I would become confused and couldn't tell whether I was sleeping or merely running in place on the snow. The running and the snow merged in me and then separated again like sunset and twilight. There was snow all around. And in this whiteness there was nothing that was not white, no dark object which I could use as a landmark to mark my progress. Of course, we had been running ... we had been divided into two groups ... the older boys, the eighth formers had cried hurrah on the distant hills ... women with red cheeks had been sitting watching us ... then we had sunk our hands into the warm sawdust. All this had happened, but very

long ago and had ended. Oddball walked over and stood right in front of me, and it also seemed that this had already happened and I was dreaming.

"Tell your mother to wash the shirt," I said and realised that it was really him standing in front of me.

He swallowed and breathed heavily.

"I brought you some sawdust," I said.

"Sawdust," he whispered.

"I told you I'd bring you your sawdust."

"You brought me sawdust," he whispered. He took the handful of sawdust from me, pressed his fist against his chest and set out for the sawmill. I grabbed him, turned him towards the village and ran next to him, but for a fraction of a second I was not sure who had turned whom and where we were running.

"Why should you come with me?" he whispered. He thought we were headed for the sawmill. "You don't have to come with me." I didn't answer, because all of a sudden it seemed that we *were* running to the sawmill. "Why are you coming with me?" he whispered. "You don't have to."

"Don't talk, breathe through your nose," I said.

"Don't come with me."

This time I thought that he simply did not want to run with me because I was bad. "I'll go there and back," he whispered, "there and back." No, he thought I was so good I was running to the sawmill a second time—for his sake.

"You'll run there and back," I said.

"Run there and back," he whispered.

"Close your mouth."

He fell down. Then he crawled on all fours and fell again.

"Run there and back. We all know how you'll run there and back," I said.

I couldn't lift him and liked having a hard time with him. I liked trying to raise him, knowing that my sawdust was in his hand and that he had such a weak, thin body.

"How quiet it is," he whispered.

"God damn sawmill, who's going to check whether we were there or not," I said.

"Since you already reached the sawmill, you don't have to come with me, I'll run there and back," he whispered.

"I have a bitter taste in my mouth, let's run slower."

"Don't come with me, I'll be back soon," he whispered.

"The boys gave me the sawdust," I said.

"The boys gave you the sawdust. You've tricked me, you're taking me to the village!" he said.

I barred the way back.

"The boys brought the sawdust. And you won't go to the sawmill. I won't let you."

"You all were at the sawmill, only I wasn't there," and he burst out crying. He was crying because he didn't have the strength to run back to the sawmill, because deep down he had agreed that he would run to the village with my handful of sawdust.

"You won't tell ... you won't tell anyone that you brought my sawdust? You won't tell that I wasn't at the sawmill?" he repeated.

"You were at the sawmill," I answered.

He ran and ran and began again:

"If they ask what there was at the sawmill, what'll I say?"

"Sawdust, what else?" I answered.

Tears came rolling down his cheeks. He didn't want to cry so he made faces to keep them back.

"So you were at the sawmill?"

"And so were you," I answered.

He choked on his tears without talking and then unable to restrain himself burst out:

"You won't tell, you won't tell that I wasn't there?"

"Your sawdust is in your hand. You took it yourself," I said, but there was no place in his skinny body for lies. He was crying and repeating: "And if they ask where the sawdust comes from?"

"From the sawmill."

"But I didn't go to the sawmill, where'd I get the sawdust?" he choked on his tears.

The village appeared in the distance. I straightened out and said:

"You run better than I do."

Tiled roofed houses stared intently at us from the hills. The village looked and saw that two of its boys—Grandpa Arsen's grandson and Grandpa Avetik's grandson—were returning together, one of them stronger and the other a bit weaker, but neither was ahead, they were coming like friends and companions, side by side. The school stood out among the other buildings with its windows reflecting the setting sun. The girls were probably watching our return from the school porch in a green, red and orange flock. Girls with pussy willow blossoms in their hands were watching our pitiful, weak and slow progress, the march of the last.

"They can see us from the school yard," he whispered.

"You're running better than I am, go a bit faster," I said.

He gathered all his strength but was unable to break away. He tried once again, was even with me for a second, his red back was almost in front of me, but

even in that instant it was obvious that he would not last more than a second. He realised it himself, and the pitiful smile that appears on the faces of people who have accepted their defeat, and reconciled themselves to it, lighted up his face for an instant.

"Go alone," he whispered.

"Look, a *khachkar*," said I.

"Did you say something? Go alone," he whispered.

"I said there's a *khachkar*."

What else could I say? I couldn't just break away from him in silence, as if there was no one with me, as if no one was running with his last strength, I couldn't break away in silence and run victoriously through the whole yard to the teacher with the girls looking at me.

Near the school, where the road turned, I looked back—he was running slowly and was virtually in the same place I had left him—the *khachkar* and his little figure stood out against the snow.

I straightened and rushed into the school yard. There were no voices. The place was deserted. I ran into the classroom. The blackboard was wiped clean. There was no one in the teachers' office either. The pendulum of the clock swung evenly in the silence and the pussy willow branches were dying noiselessly on the desk. The yard was deserted. A handful of sawdust was scattered on the floor in front of the teachers' office...

"No, no, no," I whispered.

I opened my hand. The sawdust stuck together. I felt short of air, I couldn't breathe, and it seemed that all this had already happened a long time ago. I threw the sawdust on the floor. It scattered.

I bent down, gathered the sawdust in both hands, and ran to the teacher's house. She was parcelling out the hay for the cows. Madat was standing in front of the shed with a pussy willow branch in his hand, not letting the cows in until his aunt filled the manger with hay. He frowned, looked askance at me and spat through his teeth—that's how I deal with you and I'll do it again. The teacher noticed me. It became quiet, and she looked at me. She was looking only at me. I opened my hand and heard the sawdust fall to the ground. Her eyes seemed to express love and tenderness.

"Where's Artavazd?" she asked, her lips hardly moving.

I knew that she wanted to hear me say: "He's here, in the school", but he wasn't, he had been left alone in the gorge near the lonely *khachkar*. "He's coming," I said. Her eyes grew cold.

"Is he?" she said and turned to take the hay to the cows.

ION DRUTSE

(b. 1928)

Ion Drutse, a Soviet Moldavian writer, was born in the village of Khorodishte in the Atak Region, north-west of Moldavia. He studied at the village school, and after World War II, he worked as secretary of the village Soviet, then completed his active service. After demobilization, he worked at the editorial offices of the republican newspaper *Tseranul Sovetik* and for the magazine *Femeya Moldovei*, in which his first short stories were published. In 1953, his first collection of stories, *In Our Village*, came out, and a year later, another collection, *Tale of Love*, was published. In 1957, he completed the Advanced Writing Courses and in the same year, his novella, *Gheorghe, the Widow's Son*, came out in Russian. It recounts episodes from the last year of World War II and the transformations which took place in a Moldavian village in the first years after the war.

Readers all over the country admire his works about contemporary Moldavia, such as the novellas *Leaves of Melancholy* and *The Aroma of Ripe Quince*, and the novel *The Burden of Our Kindness*. His writing is distinguished by a tendency toward psychological analysis, accurate employment of local color, idiom, and humor. His plays *Kasa Mare, Birds of Our Youth, Holy of Holies,* and *Khoria* have enjoyed long runs in the theatres of the country.

It is only natural that writers of fiction should try their hand at children's literature, and Drutse is no exception here. His "The Paper Birds" is one of a dozen or so short stories about the small but clever first-grader Bobochel.

Ion Drutse's works have been translated into many languages of the peoples of the USSR and the world.

Ion Drutse

The Paper Birds

THE PAPER BIRDS*

THE JOKE

In the end everything happened just as he thought it would. They washed him and took so long getting him all spiffed up, cramming his head with advice, necessary and unnecessary, that by the time they were through with him, he was late for school. It was pretty bad to be late on your very first day for your very first lesson!

He stood in the corridor for a bit, shaking like an aspen leaf, and when the teacher turned to write something on the blackboard, he darted through the half-opened door and slipped into a seat at the very back of the room.

But the teacher must have already taken the roll, because hardly had she turned away from the blackboard when she caught sight of him at the back of the room.

"And where did you come from, little one?"

It took a long time for Bobochel to get up the courage to speak.

"I came through that door over there. I couldn't have gotten in any other way."

"Well, since you've come, maybe you'll be so kind as to tell us your name so I can add you to the class roll."

"Of course, I can tell you. My name is Bobochel. Andrei Bobochel."

"What do you mean, 'Bobochel'? Your last name is Bobok."

"That's for grown-ups, but it would be silly to call a child Bobok. Everyone would laugh. So I guess I'll have to be Bobochel until I grow up a bit."

"Whoever gave you an idea like that?"

"No one. I figured it out for myself."

"O. K. I'll write your name the way you want, but you'll have to tell me when you're ready to have it changed back to Bobok."

"You'll probably know that better than I will. You're a teacher, after all. You will see how well I study and how fast I grow, and you'll be able to tell..."

The teacher sat down at her desk, picked up her pen, and suddenly broke out into loud, bell-like peals of laughter that rang out over the classroom. The pupils followed suit, and soon the room was filled with laughter. Bobochel thought to himself that school would be all right. After all, his father likes to say that first you have to find out whether or not a person can take a joke. If he can, that means he's a fine fellow. And here at school, there was not just one, but a whole class full of fine people.

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

POCKETS

When his father came home in the evening, Mother would ask:

"Did you have a nice day?"

Instead of an answer, Father would rummage through his pockets. If he pulled out an apple, that meant he had been working in the orchards. If he produced a bunch of grapes, that meant he had been in the vineyards. A tomato meant he had been in the vegetable gardens, and an ear of corn let them know he had been in the fields. Where else?

On Sundays, Mother would go to visit her relatives, and when she returned, Bobochel's sister Ilyana would ask:

"Who did you go to see?"

Mother would silently fiddle with the folds of her Sunday skirt, and although women don't have a lot of pockets, she would always find something, too. She would put whatever she fished out on the table for them to see. If it was a piece of honeycomb filled with honey, it meant she had been at Uncle Petri's. Fresh goat's cheese signified that she had visited Grandfather Ilya. Tasty berries from the forest could only have been from Grandmother Rutsa.

In the evenings, Ilyana would often disappear for a while, and when she came back, Bobochel would ask:

"Did you have a nice time?"

Girls don't have any pockets at all, but since he had waited for her by the gate and rejoiced at her arrival, she began to look about the house.

If she found a nut for him, it meant she had been visiting her girlfriends, but if she gave him a fancy cookie of the kind they saved for guests, that meant she had been at the recreation centre or the movies.

But if she gave him a spoonful or two of cherry jam, that meant where she had been was such a secret he could never ask.

Bobochel himself had two or three pockets. Their dog Zhavra knew it quite well, and as soon as he stepped out of the house, she would begin to sniff at his pockets. He was always prepared to share whatever he had with her, but the things he carried around in his pockets were invariably inedible, so he would find some treat for her in the house.

After Zhavra had eaten her fill, she would hurry into the old shed where her two little puppies were waiting for her. They could smell her coming and would run out to meet her. As soon as they were near, she would flop down on her side, and they would poke their noses into her belly, wagging their tiny tails with delight.

Watching them, Bobochel's father once remarked in amazement:

"Would you look at that! She hasn't got any pockets at all, but she knows just what to bring them!"

THE BRIDGE

If there was work to do in the field, Bobochel would go with his mother. If he couldn't do it just right, she would help him, and if he messed something up, she would fix it; whatever he didn't understand, she would explain, and they would return home in the evening no worse than the others.

If they went to a neighbor's wedding and there was no way to get out of dancing, he would ask his sister to dance with him. And if he couldn't keep her spinning until the end of the dance, she would spin herself. If he stepped on her foot, she wouldn't notice. If he were down, she would cheer him up, and they wouldn't dampen anybody's spirits.

If he were to become a grown-up overnight and need to build a house, he would ask his father for help. Anything he couldn't lift, his father would lift for him; whatever he couldn't hammer, his father would hammer for him.

If, God forbid, there were to be a war, he would go to the front with his grandfather who had fought in two wars and had won four medals for bravery. If Bobochel lost his head, his grandfather would perform some heroic deed, and if his rifle got jammed, his grandfather would shoot for him. If he didn't understand some foreign word, his grandfather would translate it for him. So the two of them would come home in one piece, and he would not have shamed his family.

Bobochel thought about that every morning as he set off for school with his enormous book bag. He walked along feeling glad that he wasn't alone—that he had so many relatives who wouldn't abandon him.

But all their help, unfortunately, would come later. And today, he needed help as never before, because they were going to have a test on the whole multiplication table from beginning to end. He felt in his heart that he would get called to the blackboard and would have to stand there in front of the whole class with no one to help him, although he had a multitude of relatives.

His father explained to him that studying was like crossing a river on a one-plank bridge. "There's not enough room for two people on the bridge like that, so you either have to cross it by yourself or stay where you are..."

BOBOCHEL'S SISTER

There was no more sun in the sky. No sun and no clouds... It even seemed that there was no more sky above the trees.

There were no birds singing in the gardens. No birds and no birds' nests, no berries or leaves either.

The neighbor's house had lost its welcoming smile when looked at through the slats in the fence. The house to the right didn't smile either, and there wasn't a single smiling house anywhere around, as a matter of fact.

The nib wouldn't fit in the pen. The pen wouldn't go into the case. The pencil-case wouldn't stay put in the book bag, and the book bag wouldn't stand in its place under the desk for anything.

Everything had gone awry. When everything had gone completely dark before Bobochel's eyes, a soft hand touched his shoulder and a girl's voice asked quietly:

"What was the falling out about?"

"What falling out?"

"That I don't know; all I know is that you quarrelled with someone!"

"How can you tell?"

"By the tip of your nose!"

So that's what gave him away! Bobochel sighed, and maybe because the offense was a great one, or perhaps because his sister had asked him so quietly, almost in a whisper, he started to tell her what had happened just as quietly. And wonder of wonders, as he began to talk about it, he realized it wasn't so terrible after all. He hadn't yet reached the end of his tale when the nib slipped into the pen and the pencil-case went back into his book bag. The house across the street started smiling, and so did the house next door. The gardens jumped back into place and were filled with birdsong. The sky turned blue again, and the sun came out. It was a marvelous day—fresh and fragrant as they come. He couldn't bear to sit inside on such a fine day, so he went running out, and lo and behold, the games began anew, and no one even remembered what had happened earlier.

BOBOCHEL'S FAMILY

When thunder rumbled above the trees and lightning flashed over the village as a rainstorm pounded on the roof and water poured down from the eaves, Bobochel would huddle in the corner, certain the house would come tumbling down any minute, and that would be the end of them. His family was lucky, though, because Father was strong and facile. Their house, which he had built with his own hands, was wonderfully strong and sturdy. Finally, the storm would subside, the sky would clear, and a few belated raindrops would splash against the windows.

When the winter frosts began and blizzards howled while the attic crackled with cold, Bobochel would curl up atop the warm brick stove and think to himself that the house would surely come tumbling down around them this time.

But just then, a weak tired cough would reach his ears, and he would hear

steps coming down the walk: it was his grandfather with a big bundle of firewood. He would say hello and immediately set about building up the fire. Because he was a kindly soul, the fire would blaze up at once and burn brightly, crackling merrily.

The snowstorm would abate, and the boy would settle down to listen to the old man's tales of bygone days.

Whenever Bobochel was overcome by hunger or thirst and it seemed he didn't have an ounce of strength left, and his legs would knuckle under him, the image of his mother would appear before him to say that it was all a bunch of nonsense: he had plenty of strength left and could go as far again. So he would continue on his way, amazed, for as it turned out, he had plenty of energy left after all. And soon he would look up to see his very own house coming forth to meet him.

When the twilight grew thick and the lights hadn't yet been turned on, Bobochel would be overcome by melancholy. It would seem to him that in the twilight, they would all lose each other and that nothing fine or cheerful would ever happen again. But just then he would hear the patter of his sister's feet:

"Why are you sitting here in the dark? " she would exclaim and turn on the light.

Because she was so merry and beautiful, the light she turned on was just as bountiful and glad.

One day as he was ruminating over all this at supper, Bobochel thought aloud:

"Isn't it a good idea to live together like this? ! "

His father replied with a smile:

"It couldn't be any other way. Otherwise, we wouldn't be a family."

THE VERB

Bobochel came running home from school splotched with ink and happy as a lark.

"I had a good time today at school! "

"Well, tell us what happened."

"First, I was almost late. Then Zhavra came running up to the school where there were already a lot of puppies: swarthy Petrik's dog Lupushor, Vulcan that belongs to those two brothers, and Tuzik—those three were already there.

Mother put down what she was doing and asked:

"Well, what happened next? "

"Our Zhavra started barking at them, and fools that they were, they got scared and ran off. By the time we managed to catch them all so we could introduce them properly, the school bell rang, and we had to go inside."

"So then what? "

"They played hide-and-seek during the first break. Zhavra would hide and Lupushor and Tuzik would try to find her. Then it was their turn to hide, but they couldn't understand that, and before we had time to explain it, the bell rang, and we had to go back to class."

"Oh, my goodness! And what happened after that? "

"During a recess, there was a fight. Or there almost was... Lupushor attacked Tuzik, and he's no coward—he knows how to defend himself sure enough. Then the two of them decided to attack Zhavra, but our Zhavra is bigger than the both of them together, so they didn't have a chance. They couldn't budge her..."

"So they didn't fight after all? "

"No."

"And what happened in the end? "

"Nothing. There was one more short break, but they had already gotten sick of each other by that time, so they didn't want to play together or fight any more."

"Well, since they were at school all day, did they at least learn something? "

"Sure they did! They learned everything they needed to know! "

"For example..."

"For example, they learned what a verb is."

"And what is a verb? "

"A word that signifies action or state of being. For example, run, jump, or play. Those are all verbs."

Mother was beside herself with amazement:

"Imagine that! There's a whole village full of puppies rushing about like mad, and it would never occur to anyone that they already know what a verb is! "

TONSILLITIS

Bobochel was in bed with tonsillitis. He lay there thinking to himself:

"It's all very strange. The wind carries the clouds across the sky. Snow falls from the clouds; the snow on the roofs melts, and wonderful icicles form on the eaves. But all you get from those wonderful icicles is tonsillitis."

And what was even sadder:

"When a person is lying down, time stands still. It crawls right into bed and lays there beside him. It's a long time till dinner, and it's even longer from dinner until night falls. And as soon as it's dark out, you wake up forty times and fall back asleep again before it turns light."

Moreover:

"If you get tonsillitis, they try to cure you with warm compresses, steam, hot

milk with soda, and all sorts of pills. Then they're surprised when you don't get well. But it's no wonder, because that's not the way to cure tonsillitis at all. If they would just let you have a look at your school, your classmates, and your best friend, that old tonsillities would disappear like magic."

But there was nothing you could do about your plight, because:

"No matter how long a child listens, no one appreciates it; everyone assumes that's the way it ought to be. But if he disobeys just once, they start harping: see, you didn't listen to what we told you. You sucked on that icicle, and now look what's happened. You've got yourself a fine case of tonsillitis!.."

As if that wasn't bad enough:

"All your possessions—your book bag, pencil-case, skates, sled, and your old penknife—become faded and lose all their attractiveness. So you lay there wondering whether they'll be just as ugly and uninteresting when you get well..."

But here Bobochel's train of thought was interrupted by his father:

"Listen, son, how would you like it if I took the belt to you? "

"What for? "

"As if you didn't know! "

So Bobochel turned over on his other side and fell asleep.

And sleep, as the doctor said, is the death of tonsillitis.

THE HAMMER

Father came in and out of the house quite preoccupied, rummaging here and there, obviously looking for something.

"Well, how do you like that? Yesterday, the pincers and the hammer were right where they belonged, but now when I need them, I can't find them for love or money."

He had barely gotten the words out of his mouth when Mama gave him a sympathetic nod.

"I'm going crazy without my good knife. I just saw it right there, and now it's disappeared into thin air."

And then, clear as the nose on your face, Grandmother joined in:

"Who took my big scissors? They were lying on the table, and while I turned away to thread a needle, they got up and walked away."

Suddenly Bobochel's sister started shouting at him, not making any allusions, but saying it right out:

"Well, have you got a head on your shoulders or not? ! Just because you needed a piece of wire, you took the knitting needles out of the sweater I had almost finished! Don't you know how long I've been working on it! ? "

Bobochel was hiding in a dark corner of the shed thinking to himself that there was no justice in this world, and there never would be, because grown-ups would never understand kids. And sometimes it seemed to the kids that they'd gotten quite grown-up; they even had worries of their own and things to do, just like adults. They would get down to business, working up a sweat, but the problem was that as soon as they needed the pincers or a hammer, everything was ruined. The pincers and hammer refused to recognize their budding adulthood no matter how hard kids tried to use them.

"O. K.," said his father from the shed door, as if he were not addressing anyone in particular. "I understand all that quite well, but is it really so hard to put the hammer and pincers away when you're done with them?"

Bobochel gave a start in his dark corner. How could his father possibly have guessed what he was thinking about? When he saw the hammer in his father's hand, he gave a deep sigh: of course, it was the hammer that had given him away. What a dirty trick: it would work for grown-ups and make friends with them, but it wanted nothing at all to do with kids.

THE PAPER BIRDS

Philip said:

"What if I make a paper bird and let it go from the hazelnut tree on top of that high hill wa-a-ay up there!?"

The boys told him:

"That would be great!"

Philip grinned with satisfaction and said:

"And what if the wind catches my bird when I let it go and carries it deep into the forest!"

The boys told him:

"That would be just great."

Philip revelled in his glory once more and said:

"And what if my paper bird lands in a real wild pigeons' nest and they make friends with her and build her a little nest of her own..."

The boys told him:

"That would be fantastic..."

Philip scratched his dishevelled crown and said:

"And what if my bird has baby birds made out of paper, and one fine day, they all come flying back here and circle above our school—a whole bunch of little birds on ruled paper..."

The boys were listening with bated breath and urged him:

"So go ahead, sit down and make a paper bird!"

But at that point, Philip fell silent, looked away from them, and tried to change the subject. The problem was that Philip had no idea how such paper birds were made. Some of the boys knew how, but what was the point? Their birds could barely fly. The birds they made would never be able to fly to the forest, raise a nest of baby birds, and fly back again...

WHY BOBOCHEL'S HEART STARTED POUNDING

Just before spring, their class started running short of chalk. When it was impossible to write any longer with the little white stump, the teacher would go to the classroom next door to borrow some, and the pupil who had been called to the board was left to his own devices. That was the life! You could strut about in front of the whole class and look out the window. Or if you were brave enough,

you could take a peek at the teacher's grade book—maybe you would find a good mark next to your name that you didn't even know about.

Everyone in the class dreamed of being left standing at the blackboard while the teacher went to find some chalk. Bobochel dreamed of it as well, although a lot of water flowed down the old Dniester River before he got his chance. But finally, his turn came, and there he was standing all alone at the blackboard. He didn't want either to joke with the others or look out the window—his only desire was to have a look at the grade book. This desire was absolutely overwhelming, so he approached it on tip-toe. Luckily it was open, and his name was second on the list, so he found it at once.

Bobok, Andrei. That was what he saw written in the book. "My, my, how fast time flies," he thought to himself.

Everyone still called him Bobochel at school and at home and wherever he went. He had the feeling he would be a Bobochel for a long time to come, but here in the grade book he was already Bobok, just like a grown-up. In an instant, his teacher became infinitely dear to him. He even thought she looked a bit like his mother. However, it could not be otherwise—she was a lot like his mother—only his mother knew absolutely everything about him. She knew what he had been like not long ago and what he was like just then. And she was glad that he was growing up "before her very eyes", as she said. Now there was another person in his life who knew absolutely everything about him, and the feeling was such a good one, his heart started pounding in his chest like a captured bird. That was something he had heard over the radio once: his heart was pounding like a captured bird. But he kept his feelings to himself and just stood modestly at the blackboard like a good boy, waiting for the teacher to come back. After all, that's what hearts were for, so let it pound as much as it wanted!

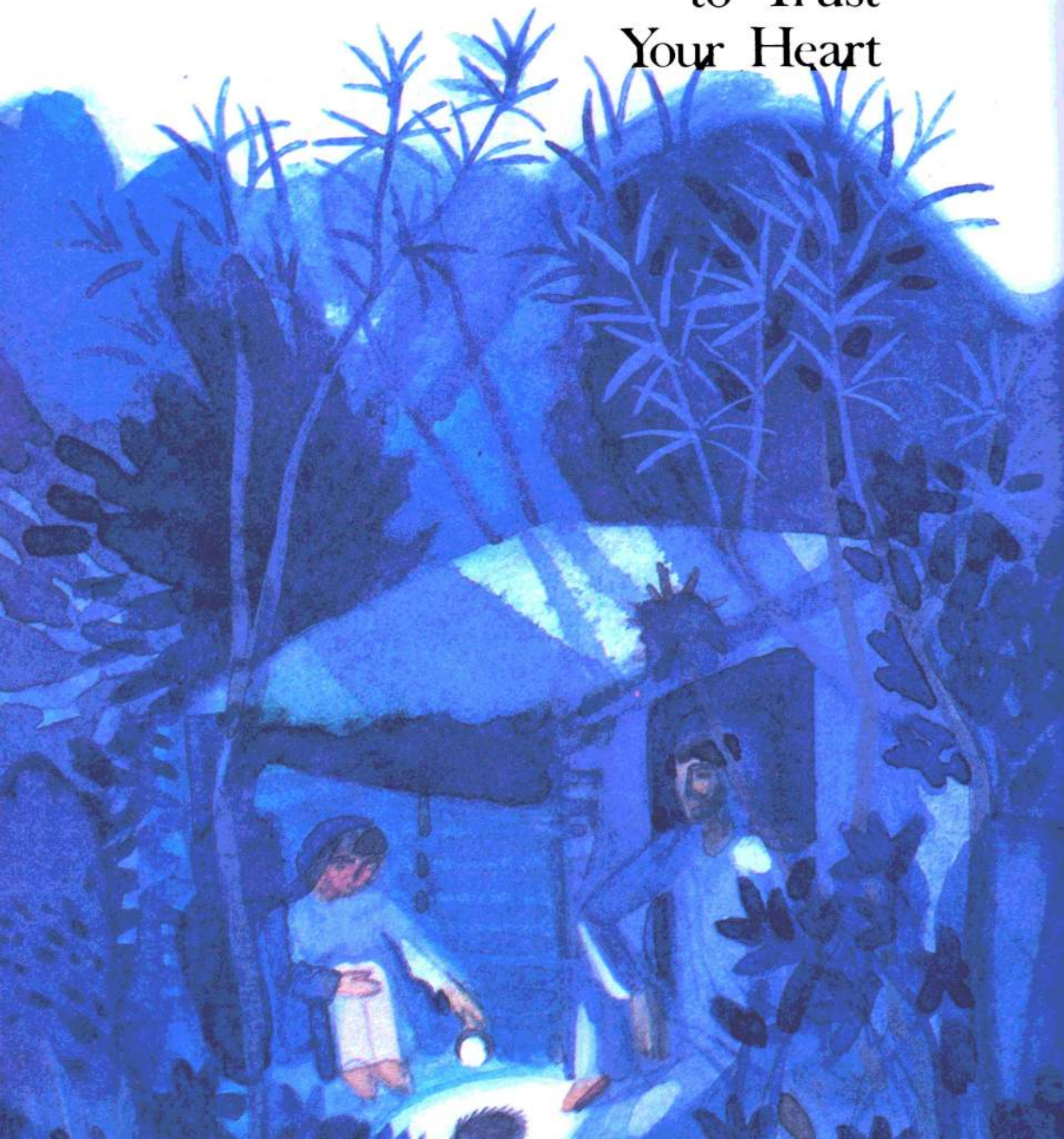
AKRAM AILISLI

(b. 1937)

This Soviet Azerbaijanian writer's full name is Akram Najaf ogly Naibov-Ailisli. He was born into the family of a collective farmer in the village of Ailis in Ordubad Region of the Azerbaijan SSR. He graduated from the Gorky Leterary Institute in 1964, but began to appear in print in 1955. Ailisli is the author of several collections of short stories, *Sweet Cherries* (1961) and *Love Is Not a Joking Matter* (1973); and the novellas *Fog in the Mountains* (1963) and *With Our Fathers and Without* (1965). His cycle of novellas *People and Trees* describes everyday life in an Azerbaijanian village during the Second World War. Dynamic plots combine with lyricism and grim humor verging on the ironic in Ailisli's prose. The author has also translated works by Turgenev, Korolenko, Chekhov, Paustovsky, Shukshin, Aitmatov, Böll, and other well-known writers into his native Azerbaijanian. Much of his own writing has been translated into the languages of other peoples of the USSR.

Akram Ailisli

You Have to Trust Your Heart



YOU HAVE TO TRUST YOUR HEART*

1

If Sarvar had returned from the army at some other time of year, it's entirely possible he wouldn't have gotten bored quite so fast. But he came back to the village in autumn. Late autumn. The harvest had already been taken in, and his father's melon field was bare... The slopes, which were generally covered with grass the height of a man, had already been mowed right down to the last blade; the orchards had been picked clean, and the fallen leaves had been raked up and burned; a few ripe quinces hanging from the bare branches and some golden ricks of hay on the slopes at the collective-farm threshing floor were all that remained of the abundance of autumn in Buzbulak.

The first day he was back home, Sarvar walked around and managed to see absolutely everything he hadn't seen for three long years in a few short hours. He saw the girls and women carrying water from the spring as they always had, the men drinking tea at the local *chaikhana*, and the teenagers playing dominoes at the recreation centre. He saw that, as before, his fellow-villagers gathered under the plane tree in the evenings to discuss soccer and politics, then unhurriedly made their way home just as they had three years ago. They invited each other over to drink tea in exactly the same order, using the very same words as before the army. That evening, several people invited Sarvar over to drink tea, and he asked a couple of his buddies to come and visit him as well... On his way home, he saw the neighbor boys standing at the corner: they had already started smoking. And farther away, he noticed a new flock of whispering, giggling girls. He learned that they still called his father Agalar the Cat Foreman, and his mother, the Chicken Lady. And he was overcome by a desperate boredom. It was absolutely unbearable.

He realized he couldn't last out the winter in the village: everything would come to a standstill, and even the noise of an occasional car passing wouldn't break the monotony. Those high, snow-covered mountains that almost touched the sky would cut Buzbulak off from the rest of the world for three whole months. There would be nothing but home and the *chaikhana*, back home again, and the *chaikhana* once more... The thought of the long winter terrified Sarvar: he fell asleep in horror of the winter to come, and he dreamed of summer, of a warm, fresh summer night.

He was in the melon field, sleeping on a platform which was floating high in the air, and the field spread out below him. The field was flooded with pale

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

moonlight, white as milk, and the big melons were sprawled all over the beds like a flock of white sheep resting... He gazed at the melons and suddenly noticed some shadows stirring at the edge of the field by the mountain. They looked like bushes but took on an eerie, ominous appearance: they were moving about and whispering to each other, plotting something... Suddenly, they all rose and dashed toward the field; from this pile of rounded figures that looked like bushes rose up an enormous shepherd in a felt cloak with a stick in his hand; he waved the stick in the air, and the white melons which had been dozing peacefully in their beds jumped up and went racing after the giant in the black cloak like a flock of white sheep. Sarvar wanted to scream, but he couldn't; he wanted to spring up, but he was frozen to the spot. At that moment, dawn came and the sky grew light. Sarvar could see that the shepherd in the black cloak was Ajdar. He was standing at the top of the mountain, waving his hand, and shouting: "Go to Baku!.. To Baku!"

So much for Ajdar and the dream, but when Sarvar got out of bed in the morning, it was perfectly clear to him that he wouldn't spend the winter in the village. He washed lightheartedly, ate quickly, and went outside. For a while, he stood by the house next to theirs, which had been deserted for ages. It was Ajdar's house: the courtyard was overgrown with thornbushes, and the roof was grown over with grass... Sarvar had found out Ajdar was in Baku at the *chaikhana*, and he had also learned Teimur was a vendor at the bazaar. Since Sarvar and Teimur had been in the same class at school, without saying a word to his father, Sarvar began making preparations for the trip. He didn't ask his mother for money, but began to buy what he needed on credit. He had never sold anything at the bazaar himself, but he had heard that almonds and walnuts were the most profitable foodstuffs to trade in. So without any ado, he set off to those of his neighbors who had almond and walnut trees. He bargained and haggled and finally struck up a deal just like a real wholesaler: Auntie Shovkat gave him sixty kilos of walnuts, and Auntie Gyulgoz let him have fifty-five kilos of almonds. Sarvar managed to convince his mother to let him go and engaged her help in persuading his father. And all the while, Sarvar could see the enormous city of Baku in his mind's eye, although he had never been any nearer the capital of Azerbaijan than the suburb of Balajarakh which he had seen when he was being sent to the army. He could already imagine how he would make a fortune after he had learned the knack of bargaining at the bazaar: he would stroll about Leningrad in a new suit and coat with lots of money in his pocket and plenty of time to spare. He would go to all the places he had visited on the rare free days he had had while serving in the army there. For some reason he recalled a long ago event concerning Ajdar.

...It was summer—the time when the melons were just ripening. The summer

when a pullet disappeared from the metal chicken coop that was standing in the melon field. In the morning, as soon as the loss was discovered, Sarvar and his father searched the entire field, beating under all the bushes, but they didn't find so much as a feather. The next night, another pullet disappeared. So Agalar decided to stay awake all night and try to catch the thief. He hid in the bushes under the trees, rifle in hand, but he dozed off toward morning, and yet another chicken vanished into thin air. Agalar was fit to be tied, because obviously, the thief was a two-legged one: for no other living creature could take a chicken from such a sturdy metal coop. He could have cared less about the chickens now: it was a matter of honor. And it was just as obvious that the stealing wouldn't stop at chickens, for the melons were ripening...

Agalar thought about it for a long time, recalling all his sworn enemies in the village and even the shifty boys from the neighboring villages, but he couldn't figure out who the culprit might be. And Agalar never did catch the chicken thief: it was Sarvar who finally saw him. One night, he appeared in person in the melon field, and as if that weren't enough, he came right up to the platform... Agalar was already snoring away, but Sarvar was just lying there on his stomach looking down at the rows of milk-white melons glowing in the pale yellow light of the moon. Suddenly, someone called out his name. Sarvar jerked up; he was too frightened to speak and couldn't even call his father.

"Don't shout!" he heard someone whispering from below. "Come down here! Don't be afraid. It's me, Ajdar..."

But the boy was so terrified he couldn't climb down. All he could do was raise his head and see Ajdar pressed to a post right below him. Ajdar was standing there with his finger pressed to his lips going: "Sh-h-h!.." His tall thin frame was all concentration as he motioned the boy to silence. Ajdar reached out his hands, pulled the boy off the platform, and gently lowered him to the ground. They crossed the melon field in silence, and when they reached the very edge, Ajdar stopped.

"Sit down."

The boy did as he was told.

"Thank you for not raising the alarm," Ajdar said with a smile, patting Sarvar on the shoulder.

For a while, they sat looking at each other, not making a sound.

"You were really scared, weren't you?"

Sarvar didn't answer.

"Listen, can you bring me something to eat?" asked Ajdar suddenly. "I'm starving... And if you don't mind, be a good fellow and don't wake up the Cat Foreman. O. K.?"

So Sarvar rose quietly and went to get some food. He brought a hunk of

goat's cheese and two big loaves of pita bread. After Ajdar had eaten, Sarvar asked him:

"Were you the one who stole the chickens?"

"Yes."

"They were looking for you all over the village!.."

"I know."

"Five policemen came to try to find you."

"No kidding!"

"They asked us if we knew anything about you. My father said you were in Baku... Is that where you were?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you come back?"

"Some rat finked on me. The police got wind of my whereabouts, and I had to high-tail it out of there."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to hole up here for a while, then when the coast is clear in Baku, I'll go back there."

Sarvar didn't ask him anything else: the rest he knew quite well. Three months earlier, Ajdar, who worked as an inspector at the local cannery, had taken three thousand roubles from the company till, supposedly to buy plums for making preserves, but instead of buying the fruit, he had disappeared. Everyone in Buzbulak knew about it. And they all knew Ajdar had been seen at the bazaar in Baku as well. A lot of rumors about Ajdar had made the rounds in the village in the ensuing three months. And their neighbor Ajdar, whom Sarvar had seen every day for as long as he could remember, had been trasformed in his imagination into some legendary brigand. Sarvar was terrified by his unexpected appearance, and he was afraid to sit with him alone in the melon field. The boy sat silently and thought long and hard before asking the next question:

"Where do you spend the night?"

Ajdar didn't answer the question at once, but stared long and hard into Sarvar's dark eyes until the boy was frightened by his gaze. Then Ajdar asked:

"Do you promise not to give me away?"

"Sure! I won't tell anybody!"

"Swear it."

"And what shall I swear by?"

"By whatever you believe in!"

Sarvar pondered for some time over what to swear by, but he couldn't come up with anything in the end.

"Do you believe in the moon?" asked Ajdar, pointing at the sky.

Sarvar looked up. The moon was so big and bright it would have been impossible not to believe in it.

"Sure I do!" said the boy.

"Then swear by it!"

"You want me to swear by the moon? O. K., I do."

"Get up and let's go."

They walked for a long time until they reached a stand of bushes right at the foot of the mountains. It was known as the Snake Pit in the village. Here, in a thicket under the spreading medlar branches, surrounded on all sides by prickly blackberry bushes, Ajdar had made his lair. To reach it, they had to crawl under the bushes for ages. The undergrowth was so dense, the moonlight could not penetrate it, and only Ajdar's flashlight cut through the darkness, revealing bits and pieces of this mysterious realm... What surprised Sarvar most of all that night was that although the blackberry patch had long been considered the abode of all manner of vipers, they did not see a single snake as they crawled and crawled under the countless bushes. Finally, when the blackberries had thinned out a

bit, Sarvar came to an opening, rose to his feet, and gaped in wonder: in front of the wattle hut Ajdar had made for himself was a glade from which the thorn bushes had been carefully cleaned away and the grass cut down. The earth was evened out, and even sprinkled with water. Beyond the hut, right at the foot of the mountain, a spring flowed from under a rock. Here, Ajdar had built a tiny dam, and the water sparkled under the moonlight like molten lead; by the fire was a sooty kettle and a few chicken bones.

Then, as if determined to shock the boy even more, Ajdar stopped in front of the hut and whistled as if he were calling a dog, but instead of the usual canine friend, a roly-poly hedgehog came running out. Sarvar was surprised that the young hedgehog felt safe enough to go rambling about with people so close by. He had never seen a hedgehog behave in such a manner before. As if it had read the boy's mind, the small beast rolled up into a ball, tucking his head in. That seemed to please Ajdar very much.

"This is my little friend," he said. "The two of us live here together happy as larks. He's quite a trustworthy fellow and a good watchdog to boot. Nothing can come near us without his knowing!"

All the things inside the hut were familiar: a quilted cotton jacket, a kerosene can and lamp, the bucket Ajdar's late mother had fetched water with, and a pot... All this had been brought from the village: Ajdar had sneaked into his house at night and taken what he needed.

The wattle hut that looked like a cobweb made of twigs, the spring, the hedgehog, and even the sooty kettle and the rusty kerosene lamp without a chimney—Sarvar thought of all these things frequently while he was in the army. And it wasn't surprising, because every single night for a month or six weeks, he would wait until his father had fallen asleep and creep off to the blackberry thicket. And every night, he and Ajdar would pick wheat, peas, or beans from the collective-farm field and make such a fine soup Sarvar had never eaten better since. Those were the happiest days of his life, although at times he was frightened—very frightened. It wasn't easy to keep the secret, because the police were still looking for Ajdar. Sarvar had a hard time at school, too, especially in Shekerek-kyzy's class, because every day she lectured her pupils on honesty, vigilance, and the necessity of uncompromising struggle against all enemies and spies. According to Shekerek-kyzy, Ajdar was the worst enemy and spy of them all. To make it even more difficult, Sarvar wasn't a child: he was already in the fifth grade, and he understood quite well what theft of state funds meant. Once, he even decided to reveal the secret of Ajdar's hiding place, but as soon as he got to the center of the thicket and saw the hut that so resembled a cobweb, all thoughts of giving Ajdar away vanished. By the light of the moon, Ajdar didn't look like an enemy or a spy at all: he was just tall, skinny Ajdar, and he looked like his mother, Auntie Khaver, if anyone...

That whole month of September passed in terror and a kind of incomprehensible joy: sometimes they would sit all night by the fire and talk. That was fine for Ajdar, who had nothing to do but sleep all day. His eyes were even puffy from too much sleep. Sometimes he would weave strange objects that resembled baskets or buckets of sedge. He rebuilt the dam by the spring almost every day, and he even started making up poems from boredom!

Guard me, little orphaned hedgehog,
For I have made these woods my home,
Leaving land and friends and neighbors,
Through bushes like a fox to roam.

"Behold the rising moon, foul world..." was the first line to another of Ajdar's verses. He would sit in front of his hut staring at the moon and repeating that line over and over. He never finished the poem, so Sarvar didn't even find out how it ended.

Fall came, and the rains began. One dark night, Ajdar silently said farewell in front of the hut, holding only his quilted jacket and the hedgehog in his hands. Oddly enough, Sarvar was sure Ajdar would take the hedgehog to Baku... But he kissed the beast on its wet nose and carefully lowered it to the ground. Then he hugged Sarvar, kissed him on the nose, too, for some reason, and soared swiftly to the very top of the mountain like a hawk. He stood there on the peak waving his hand and shouting, "Go to Baku!.." over and over.

2

And there they were standing face to face by the gate of the Baku bazaar. Ajdar had gotten very fat: his belly stuck out in front, and he had a double chin. His breathing was labored, and he wheezed as he looked angrily at Sarvar who could not for the life of him understand what he had done to deserve the wrath of his old acquaintance.

"What the devil are you doing here?" were the first words Ajdar spoke.

"I brought some stuff to sell at the bazaar; I want to use the money I make to go to Leningrad..."

Ajdar stared for a long time at Sarvar's neatly pressed trousers and at the pure white sweater with red spots peeking out from under his jacket. Such sweaters could only be knitted by the old women of their native village. He stared and stared, obviously thinking something over.

"Are you planning to sit at the bazaar and sell the stuff dressed like that?"

Ajdar asked, taking a pinch of snuff from his pocket. He sniffed it and began to cough. When the long coughing spell was over, he asked hoarsely: "What did you bring with you?"

"Almonds and walnuts. A hundred fifteen kilograms in all."

"Where did you leave them?"

"With Teimur at the other bazaar."

Ajdar gazed pensively at the road for a while, then walked over to the edge of the sidewalk and stopped a taxi.

"Get in and bring all the nuts to me."

A short while later, the two of them lugged two enormous sacks out of the same taxi; they left the nuts at the bazaar with a man Sarvar didn't know and went out through the other gates... Wet snow was falling and melting as soon as it hit the ground. Steam was rising from the ground, and there was a damp mist. Ajdar hung his head in silence as he made his way through the dampness and rot, with Sarvar following in his wake. The newcomer wanted to ask where they were headed, but he didn't dare. He wanted to remind Ajdar of the chickens and the moon, of the hut at the foot of the mountains and the little hedgehog, and even recite some of the verses he remembered; perhaps it would rouse a smile or even a chuckle from the older man... But Sarvar kept his mouth shut and was glad that he did. Ajdar might misunderstand him and think he was asking some favor in return for the assistance he had rendered so many years ago: I scratched your back, now you scratch mine... Thus, they walked in silence along the tram tracks until they had almost reached their destination. Finally, Sarvar could stand it no longer and blurted out:

"Look, Ajdar, I didn't come here to take you away from your business. I'll manage on my own. It's not my first trip to a big city, after all: I served in the army for three years in Leningrad, you know."

"O. K.," replied Ajdar, and that was all he said.

They turned the corner and entered a courtyard. Before them stood an old one-storey house with a glassed-in verandah. On the verandah was a greyhaired woman ironing sheets.

Leaving Sarvar outside, Ajdar went into the house, had a word with the old woman and motioned for the visitor to come in.

"Well, you'll be staying here," he announced. Ajdar opened one of the two doors that led from the verandah. "This is your room, and there's your bed. Drink tea and have a good rest. If you want, take a walk or go to the movies... This is Margo. She's a Georgian and lives all alone. If you need any money, just ask her. Don't bother coming to the bazaar. I'll sell all your nuts myself."

This sort of welcome was not to Sarvar's liking: why couldn't he come to the bazaar? Ajdar was treating him like a child!.. In what way was he worse than

Teimur?.. But he didn't dare disobey Ajdar for some reason; nor did he have the gumption to object.

So Sarvar wandered around the city all day long and returned only in the evening to wait for Ajdar. He was sure that his old fiend would turn up. But he didn't come that night or the next morning either. Sarvar waited until noon and headed for the bazaar, but he didn't see hide nor hair of Ajdar there. Nor could he locate his sacks, though he searched the whole bazaar. The man they had given the nuts to had vanished. So Sarvar went back to Margo to wheedle Ajdar's address out of her, racking his brains to try to figure out what it all meant. But the old woman wouldn't tell him the address, although she certainly knew it. That left Sarvar only one recourse: to find Teimur. He went to the bazaar towards evening right before closing time, and there he found his old school chum.

"Listen, you haven't seen Ajdar anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, sure I did. He left for Tbilisi this morning."

"What do you mean, he left?!"

"Just that. He left, and that's that."

"Did he say anything about me?" asked Sarvar, ready to burst into tears.

"Yeah, he said that you should go back to the village as soon as you'd had your fill of Baku. He told me you'll never make a decent vendor. The bazaar's no place for you."

"And what about the money!" shouted Sarvar. "What did he do with my nuts?"

"I don't know anything about any money," Teimur replied coolly. "You'd have to settle that between yourselves. I'm only passing on what he asked me to. He said something else: that you were to leave on an odd day, because on odd days, a friend of his is the conductor on car number seven. He said you didn't need to buy a ticket. Just to tell the conductor he sent you, and you'd get a free ride home. The train leaves at one in the morning. Don't forget. The seventh car, and say Ajdar sent you..."

If they hadn't been in the same class at school for ten years, the conversation would have ended then and there, but their talk continued, because they had been in the same class at school for ten years. Somewhere towards the end of this exchange, Teimur slipped up and smiled ever so slightly. He tried to cover his tracks, but Sarvar realized at once that Teimur was telling a good deal less than he knew.

"Don't try to fool me," he told Teimur. "Ajdar no more left for Tbilisi than you or I did, and moreover, you know where he is as sure as I'm standing here!"

"That's a laugh!" replied Teimur, but he was obviously nervous. "No one ever knows where Ajdar is. He's been living here for ten years without a residence permit."

"Why are you running off at the mouth about Tbilisi? I can tell by your eyes

that you're lying! Don't you have a shred of honor left?"

Teimur didn't reply, but Sarvar could tell he was hesitating.

"I always thought he was a human being..." Sarvar said more gently. "If I had only known he was going to swindle me like this! Two whole sacks of nuts—over a hundred kilograms! He took them from me and vanished into thin air!"

"You should have sold them yourself! Why did you give them to him!" said Teimur.

"He didn't give me the chance to! Just took the nuts and sent me packing! I had no idea he was going to cheat me like this. What a son-of-a-bitch!"

Teimur didn't say a word. They silently cleared the goods off the counter, tied up the sacks, and turned them over to the watchman for safekeeping. That done, they left the bazaar.

"Do you see what kind of weather it is?" asked Teimur.

"Yeah, it's cold."

"Do you see how clear the sky is? Just like in Buzbulak."

"It's probably snowed there by now," said Sarvar. "When I left, it was raining..."

"Ajdar always has attacks in this kind of weather," Teimur said unexpectedly.

"What kind of attacks?"

"You mean you don't know? Ajdar is a very sick man... He has a bad case of asthma. A terrible illness. As soon as it gets the least bit cold, he can't breathe at all. He never comes to the bazaar when it's like this. He usually sits it out in some restaurant waiting for the climate to improve. There's a little bar in a basement not far from the sea..."

"Do you think he might be there now?"

"It might be... Who knows?.. Only don't mention my name if you happen to find him there."

Sarvar didn't ask another question. He left Teimur and headed straight for the bar, and there, in a dark corner, he found Ajdar.

"Aha! So you went to Tbilisi, you. wretch! Is that any way to treat an old friend, you son-of-a-bitch?"

"Sit down and stop your fussing, Cat Foreman's son!"

"I didn't come here to sit with you! Let's go! I want you to give me back my sacks of nuts!"

Ajdar tugged at Sarvar's sleeve.

"Sit down!.. I don't have your nuts. I already sold them. So sit down and have a drink with me," he said, pointing to the half-empty bottle before him.

"Then give me the money, you worthless thief!" cried Sarvar shaking his fist at Ajdar.

But Ajdar calmly pushed his hand aside.

"If you want to fight, wait till we go outside!.. But for now, sit down, Cat Foreman's son."

"Are you trying to insult my father?"

"If you want to know, I'd like to lick his ass for raising such a son!"

He poured Sarvar a glass of vodka and called for the waiter to bring more appetizers to go with it. But Sarvar didn't drink, and he barely touched the food.

"It's too bad I didn't turn you in when I had the chance," he told Ajdar. "Then maybe you wouldn't have become such a sneak."

Ajdar wasn't offended in the least: he even burst out laughing. Then he asked:

"And what are you planning to do in Leningrad? Drop in on your girlfriend or sell something at the market there?"

"That's none of your business! Just give me my money!"

Ajdar was silent for a while, then he pulled a handful of almonds from one pocket and three walnuts from the other. He placed them on the table and looked sullenly at Sarvar.

"Do you recognize this?"

"Sure! I'll get my money out of you even if I have to cut your throat for it!"

"You can cut my throat later. Right now, have a drink."

"I don't want to."

"Then have something to eat," Ajdar said and picked up a walnut from the table. "Did you get these from Auntie Shovkat?" Sarvar looked up at him in amazement. "And I bet the almonds are from Auntie Gyulgoz. From the tree just beyond our fence where the last pussy willow is. There was a fig tree by it and a plum tree next to the barn by the wall... It used to bloom in the fall. Is the plum tree still standing?"

"Sure. What could have happened to it? It can't get up and walk away! Now stop playing with me, Ajdar, and give me the money.

"Is the pussy willow still there, too?"

"Of course, why wouldn't it be?"

"I first kissed Sona under that willow tree..."

Ajdar fell silent, then began wheezing like a bellows... His chest began to rattle, and through the terrible wheezing, he said to Sarvar:

"Tell that pussy willow Ajdar is dying!"

Suddenly Sarvar noticed that Ajdar's eyes were full of tears; he was crying. The tears rolled down his cheeks one after another and fell onto his jacket... Sarvar suddenly felt sorry for Ajdar and wanted to comfort him. He wanted to say something kind, but he couldn't find the words. So he picked up the glass of vodka before him and drained it.

"What date is it?" asked Ajdar.

"The thirteenth."

"The thirteenth... It's been a lucky day for me."

"Let's go," said Sarvar. "They're closing already."

The two rose only after all the lights had been turned out. It had grown colder outside, and the puddles were covered with a thin crust of ice. The moonlit street was bright and totally empty.

"You should leave today."

"Why is that?"

Ajdar turned onto the boulevard and walked along the shore, not taking his eyes from the sea. He walked in silence for a long time, then he said:

"You'll never make a trader. You've got no business hanging around the bazaar."

"I have no intention of making my living at the bazaar!"

"Then why did you come?"

"I told you. I just wanted to make enough money for a trip to Leningrad to have a good time."

"I came here to have a good time, too. That was ten years ago, and I'm still having a good time."

"There's a difference, isn't there? I didn't steal three thousand roubles of company funds!"

The sound that issued forth from Ajdar's chest was terrible to hear. He bent over double with pain and leaned with all his weight on the metal railing. He coughed and wheezed, trying desperately to catch his breath. Sarvar stood next to him and cursed himself for what he had said. Ajdar straightened up with difficulty. He couldn't talk, so they stood there looking at the sea. The moon was suspended in the middle of the sky, and the sea glowed with a cool fire under its bright light.

"Did I offend you?" asked Sarvar, upset.

"No," replied Ajdar, "I'm not offended." With that, he began to cough again. "It's that money choking me," he squeezed out through the wheezing. "That damned three thousand is stuck right here in my throat, draining my life away. Don't think I didn't want to return the money. I had it in my hands hundreds of times. But I could never quite make up my mind to do it. First it was a matter of honor, and then it was already too late. I haven't had that kind of money for the past five years or so. I could make it in a minute if I wanted to, but I don't. I haven't the slightest desire to do so. My heart isn't in it, and you have to trust your heart, you know..."

Then the conversation took on a calmer note.

"Why did you steal the money and run away in the first place?"

"I didn't run away with the money."

"How is that? Did someone steal it from you?"

"No one stole it."

"Then what was all the fuss about?"

"It was all Ali-oglu's doing... He works in the store, you know, and one day he came up short three thousand roubles. I was in love with his daughter, Sona, and I love her still. I dream about her almost every night... She came running to me in tears and said they'd taken her father to the police station. I couldn't help it. I gave her all the money that was in the cash box, then realized I was in for it. I wasn't afraid of getting arrested. I ran away because I was sure that if I stayed, the truth would come out in the end. Then, not long after, I found out that scoundrel was marrying her off to someone else. I thought I would die. If I had found myself in the village just then, I would have killed him. I even came once, but I couldn't bear to set foot in the village itself, because my heart was so heavy with grief, and you have to trust your heart..."

Ajdar fell silent, and before Sarvar's eyes arose a vision of their native village and Ali-oglu's house and the shop where he worked, and his elder daughter Sona's plump, madcap children romping about.

"Let's go," he told Ajdar, because there was nothing more to say.

"Where?"

"Wherever you want."

"Then let's go to the train station."

They walked and walked over the crunchy snow that was gradually turning to solid ice from the cold, then Ajdar sank down onto a bench along the way.

"What time is it?"

"Twelve-thirty."

"That means there isn't much time left until the train leaves."

"Why are you trying to get rid of me so fast? Did you blow all my money, or what?"

"No, it's just that I see you could easily be stuck here and get caught up in all this mess."

"But Teimur hasn't gotten caught up in it."

"And he never will."

"So why do you think I won't be able to make it here?"

"Because you're not hard enough. You're not a son-of-a-bitch."

And with that, the conversation ended. They lapsed into silence once more. Suddenly Sarvar glanced at his watch and said:

"Let's go!"

"So you're really leaving? Honest?"

"When have I ever lied to you?"

Ajdar rose from the bench.

"The conductor has your money. Remember to go to car number seven. Teimur told you, I guess. There are five hundred roubles for you. He'll give you the money as soon as you arrive. Go straight down this street and don't turn anywhere. It leads right to the station. Go on ahead. I don't think I'll go with you. I'll stay here." After a short pause, he added: "All it takes is one slip-up, and then there's no turning back..."

...The money was all in tens—a whole pile of them wrapped up in a piece of paper torn from a notebook. On the paper was written in faint, tiny letters in pencil:

A trader you should never be,
Or else you'll turn out just like me.
When in my grave I'm laid to rest,
You'll see at last that I knew best.

Sarvar took the money from the conductor, stuffed it in his pocket, and read the note then and there. Then he folded up the piece of paper and put it carefully in his pocket, too.

Sarvar was not the least bit surprised that the note was written in the form of a poem, because when he was still in school, he had written a love letter to one of the girls in rhyme, and ever since then he had known that there were certain things which could only be said in verse...

NODAR DUMBADZE

(1928-1985)

Nodar Dumbadze, a Soviet Georgian writer, was born in Tbilisi. In 1950, he graduated from the Economics Department of Tbilisi University. His first work was published in 1948. Dumbadze began writing prose after he had made a name for himself as a poet. His first major prose work, the novel *Grandmother, Iliko, Illarion, and I* (1960), was an instant success among readers of all ages, and interest in Dumbadze grew. In the story *I See the Sun* (1962), the life of a Georgian collective-farm village during the Second World War is colorfully and touchingly portrayed. The novel *Sunny Night* (1967) revolves around the world of university students. In the novel *Don't Be Afraid, Mama!* (1971) the author examines the world of Soviet border-guards and looks at the social maturation of yesterday's schoolchildren. The comic and the dramatic are integrally combined in his writing, and his stories are always imbued with profound lyricism. Faith in man and in the triumph of the better sides of his nature is the ethical core of Dumbadze's work. The majority of his stories and novels have been adapted for stage and screen.

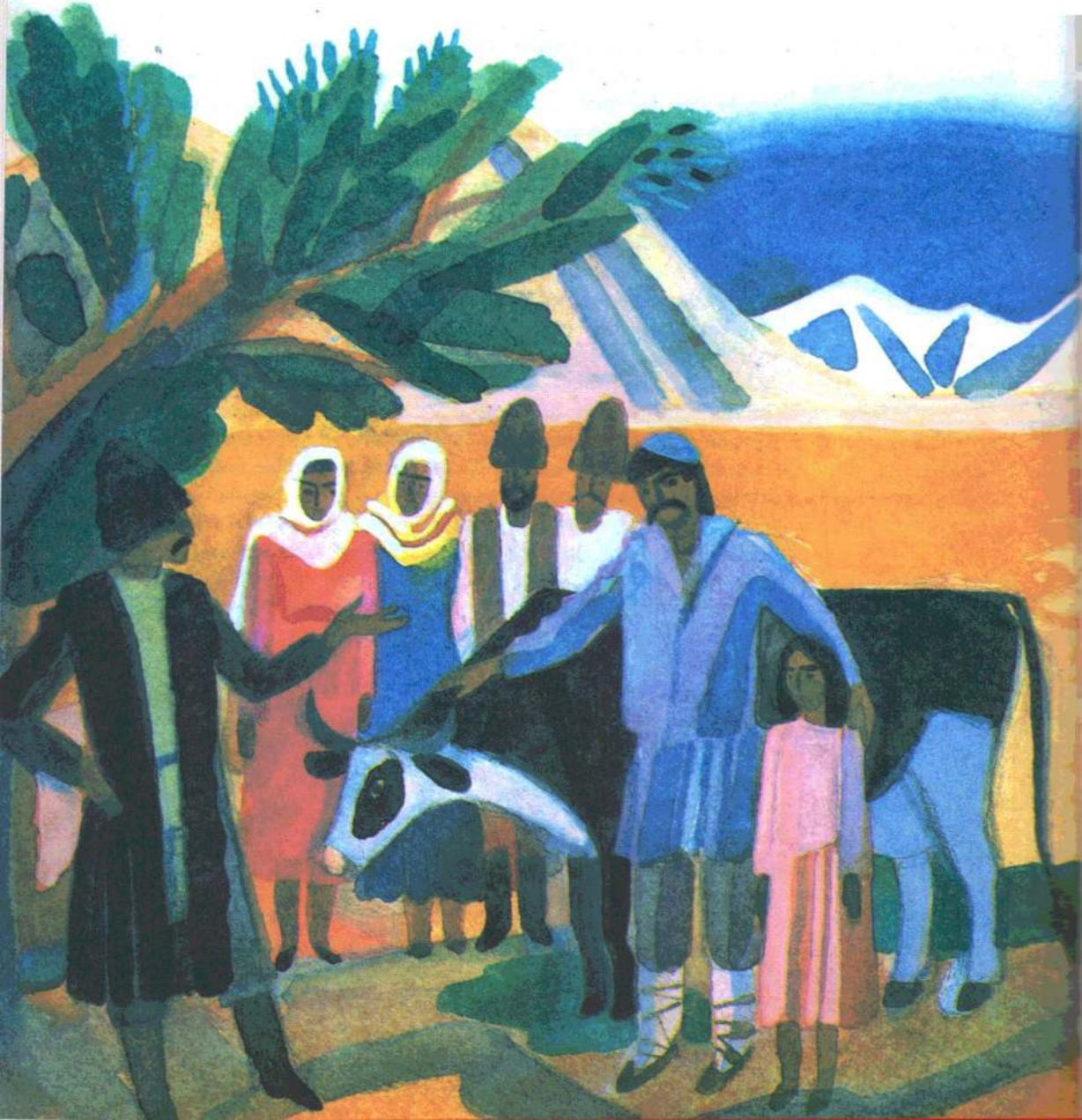
His tender, humorous poems are often published in the magazine *Murzilka*, in Georgian publications for children, and in other periodicals.

In 1980, the publishing house *Molodaya gvardiya* issued a two-volume collection of his works, which includes his new novel, *Law of Eternity*.

Dumbadze's books have been translated into many foreign languages.

Nodar Dumbadze

Don't Waken Those Feelings



DON'T WAKEN THOSE FEELINGS*

I spent last September in the country. One Sunday morning my childhood friend, Mitusha Marshania, dropped by and urged me to go fishing with him. Like when we were kids, he said. Within a few hours our basket was full of fish, each one larger than the other.

On our way home we stopped by the collective farm office. The tiny, round square in front of the building was crowded and noisy. I greeted my neighbors, exchanged a few words with them, and then asked for some tobacco. No one had any, of course. Who bothers with tobacco in the village nowadays?

"I'll bring you some," a shirtless little boy shouted. "I'll get some from my grandfather!" And he vanished like a lizard disappears into a fissure in a cliff.

While waiting for the boy, I walked over to the stand with the photographs of those villagers who did not return from the Second World War, and automatically began to read the captions.

One hundred fifty-two young faces—naive, surprised, frowning, smiling, thoughtful, cheerful, proud, light-hearted—looked at me. Some of the young men were dressed in civilian clothes while others were in military uniforms. Several photographs were enlargements of those in family albums.

I looked intently at the faces of those men who had left, never to return, and suddenly recalled scenes from the past, so clear and real it seemed like only yesterday...

...Daniel Basilia. The war caught up with him as he was busy with one of the most peaceful activities there is. He had climbed a Japanese persimmon tree and was gathering Isabella grapes.** The postman Bakur emptied a basket, put something in it, wished Daniel a happy landing as he held it up to him, and left. Daniel found a draft notice inside. He returned safely to earth and marched off to war with a song, but did not return....

...Vazhiko Tsenteradze. Lyudvig Kvitaishvili, the seretary of the collective farm party cell, dragged him out of his house and from the arms of his young wife of three days. Vazhiko was a fine fellow—ardent, cheerful and indefatigable!

"Don't make the bed, Tukhia!" he called to his sobbing wife. "I'll bash Hitler's face in and be home in two days!"

He did not return...

...Tamaz Dzhabua. He had just finished the ninth grade. They chased him out of the military enlistment office three times: "We're not in such bad shape that

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

**Isabella grapes are usually planted at the base of trees so the vines can grow up the trunks.

we have to take mere pups to fight. Get out of here!" So he ran away to the front lines. His high school diploma was issued posthumously. Now that diploma and his photograph hang in the classroom where he studied. His mother is still in mourning...

...Tsenzor Chelidze, Barnaba Magularia, Misha Gogiberidze, Ladiko Antadze, Buchuta Kalandadze, Leo Potskhishvili...

"Who is that?" I asked.

"You don't recognize him?" Mitusha asked in surprise.

"I can't place him for the life of me."

"How could you forget him! That's Kukuri, the water carrier!" Mitusha said, miffed, and began to wipe the glass over the photograph with his sleeve.

Good Lord, how could I have forgotten Kukuri, Natela's brother.

"But where's his horse? Why isn't there a picture of his horse?"

Everyone who knew and remembered Kukuri smiled. And I burst out laughing. Then I began to think about Kukuri, and a melancholy anguish took hold of me.

He was extremely handsome. He worked as a water carrier, taking water around the tea plantation in a huge barrel. For the girls, it was a holiday when Kukuri appeared. They would surround the barrel and splash water on themselves and Kukuri while joking and laughing. He would stand silently, smiling. No one knew his own worth better than Kukuri.

"Get out of here. Can't you see they don't work when you're around," Nina, the team leader pleaded.

"Let me gaze at your beauties for a while," Kukuri answered.

"What about the plan? Are you going to do their work for them? Go on! Go on!" Nina said, pushing the young man.

"Nina, if you send him away we'll stop working altogether!" one of the girls shouted.

"Kukuri, have you gone blind? Don't you see how my heart is beating? Love *me*!" another laughed.

"Why couldn't your mother have given birth to a dozen like you? Then there would be enough for the whole team!"

"I can't believe you don't love me, Kukuri. Look at me more closely."

"Settle down, you shameless hussies. I've never seen young women lose their heads so completely over some man," Nina growled.

Kukuri, wet from head to foot, laughed, climbed up on his cart, and headed for the neighboring plantation.

In the autumn of 1941, Kukuri and his horse were drafted into the army.

I remember Philipp Makharadze* coming to our village about that time and giving a speech at our club which was packed.

"Brothers and sisters, see what bloodthirsty Hitler is doing? Rise, my friends, dig trenches, sharpen your axes, set up roadblocks. The enemy will never set foot on our beloved Georgia!"

Then he looked at the schoolchildren sitting on the floor:

"And you, young people, help your elders! Our country belongs to you, so do not allow Hitler to tear it to pieces."

That very night I carried out his order: I dug a trench in the yard, sharpened an axe, and worked out a detailed plan to blow up our bridge. But Mitusha rejected my idea.

"It's silly to blow up a hanging bridge. We'll just cut the cables and crash! Then I'd like to see how Hitler gets across the Gubazouli River!"

Two days after Makharadze's speech half of the Guria district went off to war, including Kukuri and his horse.

You probably think Kukuri appeared at the enlistment office on horseback. Not so. That morning he washed and brushed his horse, and combed her mane and tail. Then he draped a piece of red satin, which he had received as a bonus for raising silk cocoons, on her back and solemnly walked to the office alongside her.

A meeting was held in the yard next to the office. People gave patriotic speeches, waved small flags and banners, and recited poetry. A local poet recited a poem by the great Akaky Tsereteli, claiming it as his own. That poet also went to war with Kukuri and his horse, and none of them returned.

A month before that, an interesting incident had occurred.

One Sunday morning Kukuri drove his only cow to the market. He tied her to a plane tree and then sat down on a boulder. His barefoot sister Natela sat down next to him.

No one bought the animal, but there was no end to the questions.

"How much do you want for the cow, Kukuri?"

"How much milk does she give?"

"Is the cow's milk rich, Kukuri?"

"What's her name?"

Some of the questions Kukuri answered, others he ignored.

Finally Anania Nibladze arrived, a man who, if he so desired, could have purchased the entire market, much less the cow.

"Is she for sale, young man?"

*Philipp Makharadze (1868-1941)—prominent government and Communist Party figure, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia in 1938-1941.

"Yes, Respected Anania," Kukuri answered, rising.

"How much are you asking for her?"

"Three thousand, Respected Anania."

"That's a lot."

"I know."

"If you know, then lower the price."

"Respected Anania, money is only paper to you, but to me this cow is my entire fortune."

"Why are you selling her?" Anania asked smiling, and he looked around complacently at those who had gathered.

Kukuri did not answer.

"I asked you a question!"

"Do you see that barefoot little girl, Respected Anania?" Kukuri asked, indicating Natela.

"Two thousand five hundred."

"She hasn't gone to school for a month because she doesn't have shoes or a decent dress..."

"Sell it to him. He's offering a good price!" someone advised.

"A good price? Will you feed my mother and sister after I leave for the army?" Kukuri snapped at the man.

"Two thousand eight hundred!" Anania said, pulling a wad of bills from his pocket. Kukuri stared at the huge hundred-ruble notes as if bewitched.

"Take her," he said.

Anania quickly counted out the money and handed it to Kukuri. The young man counted it carefully and then wrapped it neatly in newspaper and put it in his pocket. Anania untied the cow and turned to his neighbor standing next to him:

"What do you think, Akaky? Will it be enough for sixty people? We're going to raise the roof on my new house tomorrow."

"I doubt it, Respected Anania."

"But we're also having suckling pig and turkey."

"Then of course it's enough."

"It's a cow, after all," Anania said, slapping the animal's back.

Kukuri looked at Anania and then at his neighbor in astonishment. Suddenly his lips paled and his nostrils flared.

"Why are you buying a cow, Respected Anania?"

Anania burst out laughing.

"What do you mean, why? To butcher!" his neighbor answered for him.

"To butcher?"

"What did you think?" Anania asked, surprised.

Kukuri immediately pulled the bundle out of his pocket.

"Here is your money, Respected Anania. I'm returning it. How could you butcher a cow?"

"Have you gone crazy!"

"No, Respected Anania, but I'd sooner let you butcher me than my cow!" Kukuri cautiously took the rope out of Anania's hand, stuffed the money in the man's pocket, and turned to his sister:

"Take the cow home."

"I'll give you three thousand!" Anania said.

"I said take her home."

"Three thousand two hundred!"

"I won't sell her, Respected Anania."

"Three thousand five hundred!"

Natela stopped. Kukuri looked at her bare feet, then at the money, then at Anania, and finally at the cow. He did not utter a word. People anxiously awaited the outcome.

"Didn't you hear me?" Kukuri suddenly exploded. "Go home this minute!" he shouted at his confused sister. "Home, cow, home!" he said, shoving the animal.

And the cow started for home, with Kukuri behind her.

"What a dolt!" Anania said.

"He's simply an idiot!" someone else added.

The incident I am now going to relate occurred in February of 1943, during a Georgian language and literature lesson.

We eighth graders of Bondiskhidi High School sat around the fireplace trying to warm our frozen hands and feet just a little while waiting for our teacher, Djokonda Melimonadze.

The village of Bondiskhidi lined both banks of the illustrious Gubazouli River (people call it the second waterway of Guria. The first is the Supsa River). There is a hanging bridge across the river, which gives the village its name.* Before the bridge was built the village was called Djvartsma,** not because Christ was crucified there, but because it was the scene of the nun Tsenteradze's agonizing death at the hands of the invading Tatars. If you don't count Saint Shushanik and Queen Ketevan,*** Tsenteradze was the first woman to die for the

**Bondiskhidi* means hanging bridge in Georgian.

***Djvartsma* means crucifixion in Georgian.

***Ketevan was the mother of Georgian King Teimuraz I, and was tortured by the Iranian Shah Abbas in 1624.

Christian beliefs, and she is known by every person in Guria. We learned about all that from the lectures given by Agnessa Bagaturia, the leader of our atheist circle at the club. We are proud of our past.

Bondiskhidi was surrounded by small hamlets: Metsieti, Chanieti, Buksieti, Tskvarameti, Ukuneti, Kviriketi, Kakabeti, Kokoleti and Tsipnagvara. The children living in those hamlets went to high school in Bondiskhidi after finishing local elementary schools. They were different than Bondiskhidi children except that the Bondiskhidi children's brains were a little addled from going back and forth across the hanging bridge, and the Tsipnagvara children's eyes were sadder and their faces wore tired expressions. That is not hard to explain: it was seven kilometers from Tsipnagvara to Bondiskhidi, and therefore, they had to rise an hour earlier than the others. In everything else, Bondiskhidi and its surrounding hamlets was an ordinary Gurian village and its high school, an ordinary village high school, bearing very little resemblance to the Ikalto Academy.*

Kukuri and his sister Natela were from Tsipnagvara. I was living with relatives in Bondiskhidi, having been sent there to escape the famine in the city during the war.

So, it was a February morning. And we chilly eighth graders of Bondiskhidi High School crowded around the smoldering fireplace waiting for our Georgian language teacher, Djokonda Melimonadze.

She entered the classroom without her usual "hello" and "be seated", tossed a magazine on the table, dragged a chair over to the fireplace, sat down, and held her hands, white from the cold, in front of the flames.

"Well, children, are you cold?" she asked, after a moment of silence.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"How many of you are there today?"

"Eight out of sixteen."

"So few."

"Never mind, we'll start and they'll come later," Titiko Shanturia suggested.

"Where can they be?"

"Probably on their way."

"Who, for example?"

"Natela Nizharadze."

"Will she come? She won't let you down?"

"I don't think Natela is capable of such a mean thing," Guri Gogiberidze answered.

*Ikalto Academy was an institution of higher education organized at the turn of the 11th century.

"Do you know today's lesson?"

"Me? Of course, I do."

"In that case, begin please."

Gogiberidze was saved by the creak of the door. Natela entered.

"Ohhhh! Why did you hurry?" the teacher exclaimed.

"My mother is ill," Natela lied, and she hung her head, ashamed of her own falsehood.

"All right, all right, don't wish illness on a healthy person."

"What am I supposed to do? It is seven kilometers from my house to the school."

"You need to get up earlier."

"How much earlier, in the middle of the night?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Did you learn the lesson?" Natela hung her head even lower. "I am talking to you, Natela!"

"No, I didn't."

There was an uneasy silence in the room. It lasted for quite some time, and all the while the teacher did not take her eyes off Natela.

"Why did you bother to come to school? Just think, you get up at the crack of dawn, walk such a distance through the snow, in a blizzard and freezing temperatures, and for what? In order to announce to the teacher that you don't know your lessons? Is it worth risking so much just for that? You could stumble along the way, or fall into a ravine, or, heaven forbid, a wolf might come out of the woods! Then you'd be lost, and what's more important, we'd all be lost! Why take such unnecessary chances? Wouldn't it be better to send a telegram—I don't know my lessons so I'm not coming to school today..."

The classroom shook with laughter. Natela laughed, and even the teacher smiled.

"All right, come here and warm yourself," she said, giving Natela her seat by the fire. She walked over to her desk, picked up a book and began to read:

" 'The Order'. A story by Egnate Ninoshvili*..."

The teacher spoke for some time about the pitiful, hungry existence of the Gurian peasantry, and the equally poor and unhappy life of its faithful defender, Egnate Ninoshvili... She spoke with such warmth and sincerity that we were all moved to tears. Our sufferings culminated when exhausted, hungry, cold Katsia Mundjadze, sent to guard the railroad tracks by the village authorities, lay down to rest, placing his head on the rails so he would awaken before the train approached.

*Ninoshvili Egnate (real name Ingorokva) (1859-1894)—Georgian writer.

When the teacher came to that episode, she closed her eyes and continued in a whisper, from memory.

"After laying his head on the rails, Katsia fell asleep. The full moon shone, illuminating his unshaven face. A nightingale warbled sweetly in the bushes. A train appeared in the distance. Katsia dreamed that he felt the train approaching, leaped to his feet, picked up his gun, and came to attention. The train neared. The cars were made of pure gold and the people inside were dressed in gold military coats. They stared at Katsia angrily, as if reproaching him for being asleep at his post. 'My God!' Katsia thought. 'What if they send me to Siberia! My poor family is lost!' The wheels of the train slid along the rails where Katsia lay, and continued its course...' "

The teacher fell silent. We sobbed violently.

"Then what happened?" Sosiko Gigineishvili asked, swallowing his tears. The teacher continued the story, trying hard to control the quiver in her voice:

"At dawn the railroad inspector found a decapitated corpse on the tracks. It was Katsia Mundjadze..."

For five minutes absolute silence reigned. Then the teacher walked over to the fireplace, asked Natela to stand up, and sat down on her chair.

"Are there any questions?" she asked.

There were none. Katsia died and that was it. What questions could there be? Suddenly Natela's voice sounded:

"I have a question."

"Go ahead."

Natela walked slowly to her desk.

"If Katsia's head was cut off, who told about his dream?"

All hell broke loose in the classroom, and the teacher was shocked. We roared so loudly the windows rattled. Natela sat down and looked around in astonishment, not understanding what she had said that was so funny.

When the class calmed down the teacher raised her flushed face.

"Stand up, Natela!"

Natela stood up.

"Get your books!"

Natela picked up her books.

"Leave the room!"

Natela moved toward the door.

"I don't want to set eyes on you in my class again!"

Natela left. We sat in stunned silence. No one expected things to end like that.

"Teacher," I said, standing.

"What do you want?"

I myself did not know what I wanted at that particular moment, but I felt

if I did not express all that was in my heart, I would burst. I began to talk quickly:

"What is the matter with you, Teacher? You've tried to spoil everyone's mood all morning. You read to us about starvation, unhappiness and death. About a chopped off head, and about sorrow and tears! Don't we have enough troubles of our own? Read that story to happy children who have plenty to eat and let them pity poor Mundjadze. We have enough of our own grief with the war, famine and cold. And if you want to know, you expelled Natela Nizharadze for no reason! So there!"

I sat down, barely able to breathe. The teacher stood up immediately.

"Are you finished?"

"Yes, I am."

"Did you say everything you wanted?"

"Yes, I did."

"So, you don't like Ninoshvili's story?"

"No, I don't."

"And who was crying his heart our a minute ago? Wasn't that you, or did I imagine it?"

"I cried because I don't like it."

"Get your books together!"

I had expected that, and had already gathered my books.

"Close the door after you, and catch up with Natela. She couldn't have gone far."

I went outside. Suddenly I felt as if I'd been in a stifling hot bakery all that time and someone had just dragged me out and pushed my head in the snow.

Natela was walking slowly, with her head down. I called to her. She looked back and stopped.

"The teacher threw me out too!" I said, smiling.

"Nodar, why did you all start laughing in there? What did I say?" Natela asked sadly.

"Well, you see... You shouldn't ask those questions about a writer."

"Why not?"

"You just shouldn't."

"But what if the story isn't believable?"

"Well, maybe that part about the dream was a little far-fetched, but on the whole, everything was believable."

Natela shrugged her shoulders.

"Why did she throw you out?" she asked.

"I told her she was wrong to read us stories about other people's deprivations

when we have so many of our own," I looked proudly at Natela. "Aren't I right?"

"Not at all! Just the opposite, after that story I felt a little better. It means there were people who lived worse than we do."

Her response was so unexpected that my mouth dropped open in surprise.

We walked the seven kilometers to her village in silence. She did not ask me where I was going or why I was walking with her, and I did not tell her I was seeing her home. There was nothing unusual in that, neither for us nor for those we met along the way. Everyone knew about us. They knew our friendship was pure and tender, the beginning of a long life together. There was a time when a sinister shadow almost darkened the light of our two beating hearts, but God himself came to our rescue.

It was autumn, and the weather was warm, sunny and bracing.

Natela and I lay on our backs in the mowed grass along the bank of the Gubazouli. I was reciting poetry to her. Suddenly, a strange calmness came over us. The sun's bright rays beat down on us, and we could hear each other breathing and the beating of our own hearts. Our world became magical, like in a fairy tale. Our eyelids closed, and a marvelous sleep carried us away on its light wings.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the frowning face of the collective farm watchman, Mikhako Arobelidze, above my head.

"What have you done, young man, ruined an orphan?" he asked. His voice was shaking.

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you doing here?"

"We were sleeping."

"And nothing else?"

"What else?"

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I swear to God!"

"Swear on your honor!"

"I swear on my honor!"

"So, there's no need to wake her?"

"No, please don't."

Mikhako looked at the sleeping Natela for a moment, and his face softened.

"A real angel, the little waif!" he said quietly.

"Yes, she is an angel," I said.

Mikhako stroked my head, smiled, and walked away.

At the old mill Natela suddenly stopped and listened to something. Then she bolted forward and flew toward the village. I barely caught up with her.

Near the ruins of the church to Queen Tamar, she again stopped.

"Kukuri," she whispered, and fell to the ground as if shot.

Heart-rending wails and lamentations could be heard coming from the hamlet. Natela did not cry or scream. She sat motionless in the snow, her face void of expression. I ran to the hamlet and got some neighbors. Unable to rouse the girl, they carried her home. Natela's mother, her face flayed and bleeding, stared dully at her semi-conscious daughter.

"Look to your daughter, or she will die too!" her neighbors said.

"Let her die. Let the sun go out and the sky fall. My Kukuri is gone."

Natela remained in bed for a month. Then she recovered, but did not return to school.

From that time on, the seat next to me remained empty.

"Let's go, Nodar! The fish will spoil!" Mitusha urged, shaking my arm. I took one last look at the stand, and turned to follow him.

I never imagined memories of childhood could be so depressing.

The next morning my cousin came into my room.

"There is a woman asking to see you."

"Invite her in."

"I did. She won't come."

I had to go outside. A nice looking woman of about forty-five stood at the gate holding a bag.

"Hello, Respected Nodar," she said.

"Hello," I answered, and added for politeness: "Won't you come in?"

"She brought a gift," I thought. "Now it begins: help her son find a job, call someone, obtain something..."

"No, thank you. I just dropped by for a moment."

"How can I help you?"

"You don't recognize me, Respected Nodar," she said, smiling sadly.

"I have to admit that I don't..."

"I never thought you wouldn't recognize me."

"I don't think we've met."

"I am Natela. Kukuri Nizharadze's sister."

"Natela!" My knees suddenly went weak. "Natela," I repeated, and sat down on a log. "Natela, it's you..."

She sat down next to me and pulled a jar from her bag.

"Here. I brought you some spring honey. From our own hives. It's as clear as amber."

"Thank you."

"I heard you have a bad heart. Honey is the best medicine... They said you asked about Kukuri... And about his horse... Are you here for long?.. Are you alone or..." She spoke in spurts, not looking up. Her voice shook.

"Natela, how are you?" I interrupted.

She sighed and looked at me intently.

"As you see, Respected Nodar. I am growing old. And what about you? How are you feeling now?"

"I am fine, Natela. Tell me about yourself. How are you? How is..." I faltered.

"My life is like that of other village women."

"Tell me about yourself, all the same."

"I harvest tea, milk the cows, look after my children and my husband."

"You are married."

"I married late, Respected Nodar. Now I have four children. They are all in school."

"And your..."

"He is a good man. Honest and hardworking."

"Natela, come inside!"

"No, I don't want to disturb you," she said, fidgeting anxiously.

"Obviously, something is bothering you. What is it?"

"Yes, I brought you... Don't get the wrong impression... You are a famous man now... You could use this more than I..." She held out a yellow page from a notebook.

"What is it?"

"It's ... it's a poem. Your poem."

I quickly took the page, and was stunned.

Natela of Tsipnagvara
The sun cannot compare with you.
*You are my tsitsinatela,**
You are gladness, you are sorrow.
Drowning in wild, audacious dreams,
I feel the sweetness of your kiss.
How dear to me your sharp words seem!
You are sorrow, you are gladness.

And everything came back to me as if it were yesterday—how I borrowed lines of the poet Galaktion** without a trace of remorse, and fed the flames of our love.

"I have other poems of yours too, but this is the best."

"Have you shown it to anyone?"

"Of course not!" she answered, shocked. "How could I show others a poem written to me?"

"Not even to your children?"

"Not my children, not a living soul."

Tears came to my eyes.

"Natela, you are a wonderful woman. I'm sorry I did not recognize you immediately. Now... But it's too late now, Natela. Forgive me."

"It's not your fault."

"Natela!"

"Yes?"

**Tsitsinatela* means firefly in Georgian.

***Galaktion Tabidze (1892-1959)—Georgian poet.

"Everything has come back to me. I remember Kukuri and his horse. I remember that day you tried to sell the cow and didn't. And do you remember the story about Katsia Mundjadze and his dream? But how could you forget, since we learned of Kukuri's death that same morning? And do you remember when we lay in the grass? I recited poetry and then we fell asleep? Do you remember?"

Natela got up. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Nodar, all that is asleep in me. Don't waken those feelings, I beg you."

I took her rough, toil-worn hand and pressed it to my lips. She cautiously freed it, embraced me, kissing my chest over the heart, turned and left.

"Forgive me, Natela!" I called.

She did not answer.

I stood at the gate for a long time, hoping she would look back at least once. But she did not.

She walked away, taking my joyless childhood with her...

AINO PERVIK

(b. 1932)

Aino Pervik (married name Raud), a Soviet Estonian writer, was born in Rakver. Her father was a doctor's assistant. She went to school in Tallinn, and graduated from Tartu State University in 1955, with a degree in Ugro-Finnish languages. While at the university, Pervik studied Russian, English and Finnish. She initially worked in the children's literature department of the Estonian State Publishing House, and then as an editor of children's programs for Estonian Television. She began to write while working at the publishing house. Her husband, the famous children's writer Eno Raud, also influenced her in that direction. Her first book was *Kersti's Friend Minna* (1961). After she and her husband travelled through Northern Karelia, they published a joint book entitled *Reine on Bear Trails* (1962). In 1969, her novella for teenagers, *The Balloon*, was published, which tells of a group of schoolchildren's first attempts at independence and raises pertinent moral questions. The book *Kaari Helps Mama* (1971) is written for pre-schoolers. Of particular importance in Pervik's work are her fairy tales and mischievous, poetic short stories for children. She also translates books by Hungarian and Finnish writers into Estonian.

Aino Pervik

The Balloon

THE BALLOON*

An excerpt

Tuuli, Mart and Nelle stood near the Freedom Monument, discussing what to do. They were hungry.

"It would be great to eat something solid, a chop or schnitzel, don't you think?" Mart asked. "With a delicious sauce."

The canned food and sandwiches they had left in the stuffy classroom held no attraction whatsoever.

"I'm dying for some meat!" Nelle declared.

"Why don't we go somewhere to eat," Mart suggested, and glanced at Tuuli questioningly.

But she squinted and ignored his suggestion completely. She was looking across the street.

"Look who's there!"

Ivar stood on the other side of the street, separated from them by evening rush-hour traffic, looking around absent-mindedly. The young people laughed. When three people are watching a fourth and he does not notice, it is always funny.

Ivar seemed to have reached a decision and moved on. After taking a few steps along with the flow of pedestrians, he appeared to have changed his mind, because he stopped. He stepped out onto the pavement and looked as if he were about to cross the street, but immediately decided against it and headed uncertainly in the direction he had been going.

"We should help the guy out," Mart said.

There was no sense in waving to him. He wouldn't notice. Dodging the cars, they hurried across the street and caught up with Ivar.

"I'm starving," Ivar said immediately.

"Same here. We were just thinking about going someplace to eat."

"O. K. Only let's not go to some little café. I want something solid. With sauce."

The girls laughed.

"Where have you been?"

"I was looking for a friend I met at a sports tournament. His name is Laimonis. But he wasn't home."

They pushed their way through the crowd. It was hot.

The cafeteria they entered was packed, and a doleful line stood in the lobby.

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

Smoke and kitchen fumes came wafting from the dining room. The place smelled of stewed cabbage.

"Let's get out of here," Tuuli said.

Everyone agreed, though Mart pointed out that it would be the same everywhere.

"Why don't we go to a restaurant," Ivar suggested. "It shouldn't be hard to get in. It's still early."

"It will be expensive," Tuuli said, hesitating. "My money is running out."

"I'll lend you some," Nelle promised.

"I've got money too," Mart said.

But the first restaurant they tried was full. Their spirits fell from hunger and disappointment. They felt unwanted and superfluous. No matter where they went, someone had gotten there before them.

Finally, Lady Luck smiled on them. They found a restaurant where there were quite a few empty tables. That might have been because the restaurant was an expensive one, but since they were fortunate enough to have found a place, they did not want to think about high prices.

The waiter took them to a table with a snow-white tablecloth and sparkling glasses, and handed them the menu.

"This is just great!" Ivar said, satisfied. "I'm starting to feel human again."

He picked up the menu and began to study it.

"Let's order a decent second course. I want at least three helpings."

Nelle tried to behave like a lady. It was all so interesting: the big city, a restaurant, the polite waiter, and all the well-dressed people. Unfortunately, the four of them did not look too elegant, though they had all brought good clothes with them on the trip, especially for Riga, despite the weight and discomfort. And they were tan, almost black from the summer sun. Nelle decided that they made a favorable impression.

She leaned on the arms of her chair casually and self-assuredly, and waited for Ivar to finish with the menu.

When he was through with the menu, Mart politely handed it to Tuuli. The girls bent over it.

"Should we order something to drink?" Mart asked. After all, they were in a restaurant and should act appropriately.

"Of course!" Nelle said haughtily.

"How much money do we have?" Ivar asked.

They counted what they had with them. (It turned out that they could order something to drink. And while in reality, none of them really wanted alcohol, they all felt it was absolutely necessary for chic and to give them confidence.)

"Dry wine is drunk with the second course," Ivar said, showing he was

experienced in maintaining things on a high level. "Then we'll order coffee with liqueur."

"I think brandy is better," Mart said doubtfully. His family held liqueur and those who drank it in contempt, and only drank brandy.

"Yuck, brandy is so awful!" Nelle said. "It smells like bugs."

Tuuli wanted liqueur as well.

It was surprisingly pleasant to sit in the cool restaurant after running around town all day. Their feet ached. For three days they had been visiting all of Riga's museums, the zoo and stores. Now it was wonderful to relax and enjoy a delicious meal.

They ordered a great deal of food, a bottle of wine, and a little liqueur to drink with their coffee. They also set aside enough for a tip. The situation demanded it.

When their food came, they began to eat in silence. They had voracious appetites and the food was unusually delicious. They did not like the wine, as it was too tart and set their teeth on edge, but none of them would admit that to one another. The wine was probably supposed to taste like that.

"God, is it hot in here!" Nelle said, placing her palms on her cheeks. Neither she nor Tuuli would ever concede that their faces were flushed from the wine.

The band began to play, but the first song was not a dance number. They listened to the music in silence. After such a huge meal they were all feeling a bit drowsy.

The waiter brought coffee and liqueur, and poured the latter into their glasses.

"Well, let's drink to our friendship!" Ivar said, when the waiter had left. And he looked at Nelle the way a young man looks at his girl.

They drank.

"This is much better!" Tuuli said, indicating the liqueur.

"And fairly strong," Mart noted. "Eighty proof."

"What was the wine?" Tuuli asked.

"Oh, the wine was weak," Ivar said nonchalantly. "Natural wine doesn't come stronger than twenty to twenty-four proof."

"How do you know all that?" Tuuli asked naively.

"That kind of information is included in the education of gentlemen," Mart said with importance, and he leaned back in his chair with the look of a man of the world. He was sorry he did not smoke—now was just the time to light up a cigarette.

They were the first out on the dance floor.

Nelle's heart skipped a beat when Ivar put his arm around her waist. Through the haze in her head she remembered last night's rosy sunset. It goes without

saying that she maintained an indifferent expression. Heaven forbid Ivar suspect what she was thinking. And nothing was written on Ivar's face either.

Everything was terribly interesting. Just like in the movies. Just like in the adult world.

Nelle looked around happily. Three young men sat at a table not far from the band and watched the dancers. One of them smiled at Nelle and nodded. Nelle smiled back.

They danced every dance without pausing.

Everything was great. Sometimes Nelle danced with Mart and Ivar with Tuuli, at other times they would change partners. Then the band took a break.

Mart filled their glasses.

"Let's drink!"

They drank, washing the liqueur down with their cold coffee. The noise around them seemed to be coming through cotton.

Tuuli burst out laughing. It seemed to her that everyone was being terribly funny. And in general everything was incredibly hilarious.

The last of the liqueur shone in their glasses.

"I'm completely drunk!" Tuuli confessed.

"How could you be?" Ivar asked condescendingly. Yet his eyes were unusually bright.

They took a little sip of their liqueur so that some would remain.

When the band began to play again, a broad-shouldered, red-headed young man with bloodshot eyes walked over to their table and touched Tuuli's arm. She pulled it away in fright.

The young man said something in Latvian, but seemed to realize immediately that he was not understood.

"Let's dance," he said in Russian.

Tuuli shook her head upset. The young man turned to Nelle and asked her to dance.

"I'm not about to dance with anyone who comes along!" she said arrogantly.

The young man laughed self-assuredly, pulled several twenty-five-ruble notes from his pocket, and threw one of them in the middle of their table with a casual gesture.

"What about now?" he asked, looking at them triumphantly.

Mart and Ivar leaped to their feet. What an insult! Infuriated, Mart grabbed the money and stuffed it into the young man's coat pocket.

While Ivar was taller than the stranger, the latter was more broad-shouldered and muscular. Next to him Ivar and Mart looked like frail schoolboys. The young man put his arms around them and laughingly gave them a big hug.

What a put-down in front of the girls! Damn it! Men don't stand for such things! The boys broke loose.

"Your're asking for a black eye!" Mart shouted. He did not realize he had spoken in Estonian.

At this point the waiter appeared and said something to the intruder in Latvian. The latter shrugged his shoulders and said something back. The waiter took him by the arm and led him away from their table. After moving a short distance, the young man turned and blew Tuuli a kiss. Shaking with embarrassment, Tuuli acted as if she hadn't noticed.

"Let's finish the last few drops," Ivar said, raising his glass. "To calm our nerves."

"Damn!" Mart said in anger. "A two-hundred-pound ass! I'm sure he's a fisherman. All brawn and no brains, and easy money. People like him don't know what to do with all their dough!"

They drank down the last of their liqueur.

Soon the waiter returned, carrying a silky, blue balloon. He held it out to Nelle.

"I was asked to give this to you."

Tuuli looked perplexed. Nelle took the balloon in embarrassment. There was a note attached which read *"Friendship—Bazátság."*

"Good Lord!" Nelle said.

"Where did that come from?" Mart asked.

The waiter had already left. Nelle looked around the room with curiosity. The three young men sitting near the band glanced at them and laughed.

"Good Lord, it's from them," Nelle said, and waved.

The young men waved back. Then, by means of gestures and mime, they asked permission to join Nelle and her friends. Why not? They seemed like nice guys.

"Friendship!" the young men greeted them in lieu of hello.

"I hope we aren't intruding," the tallest of the three said.

"No, of course not!"

"My name is Marcsi. I'm from Budapest."

Ivar stood up and held out his hand.

"Ivar. From Tallinn."

The other two were Pista and Feri. Pista had a long, thin face and a moustache. Feri's face was round, like a walnut, and very tan. He also had a moustache. Just like Petöfi, the famous Hungarian poet. In fact, he looked a lot like Petöfi.

"Are you Estonians?" Pista asked.

"Yes. We're on a bicycle tour," Mart answered eagerly. After the incident with the fisherman, it was particularly pleasant to talk with such nice Hungarians.

The young people's moods improved immediately.

They learned that Marcsi and Pista were graduate students in Moscow.

"I'm an archeologist," Pista said. "And Marcsi here studies icons. He lives in the past."

"To make up for it there's Feri, who is as contemporary as they come: *cinéma vérité*," Marcsi said.

"Films?" Nelle asked. It was incredibly fascinating.

"I'm a cameraman for documentary films," Feri said, and smiled modestly.

The waiter appeared and the Hungarians ordered champagne.

"Are you university students?" Pista asked when the waiter had left.

"No, just seniors in high school," the young people admitted.

"We'll be at the university next year," Mart added. It was distressing to be so young that you had not even graduated from school.

Pista and Feri invited the girls to dance. Marcsi began to tell jokes, enjoying them thoroughly himself. His eyes twinkled, his face shone, and his expression and voice changed constantly. The jokes were clever, and Mart and Ivar laughed so hard tears rolled down their cheeks.

Everything was just like in a musical. Champagne foamed in their glasses, Nelle and Tuuli danced until they were ready to collapse, and the Hungarian temperament sparkled, delighted and charmed.

"Don't drink any more," Mart told Tuuli.

But she only laughed and drank several glasses in a row to spite him.

Then they walked through a park or public garden, singing and laughing for no particular reason. It was already dark.

Ivar, Pista and Marcsi were in front. Marcsi told one hilarious story after another and Ivar was exhausted from laughing. That was a real master for you! Ivar tried to remember the jokes. They were certainly worth repeating to his friends. Those Hungarians were great guys!

Nelle and Tuuli walked with Mart and Feri farther behind. They danced, and ran, and hid behind trees, laughing continually. Tuuli was tired and her feet hurt. To tell the truth, she would have gladly sat down for a while. She began to let the others get ahead. Mart noticed and slowed down too. At first Tuuli did not see him standing nearby. She was aware of him for the first time when he sat down beside her after she began to get sick. Mart did not leave, though Tuuli particularly wanted to be alone at that moment. Finally she began to cry helplessly. And so the two of them sat there on the bench—Tuuli crying and Mart silent.

Nelle did not notice when Tuuli and Mart disappeared. Ivar and the two Hungarians were nowhere to be seen either. She was alone with Feri, that short cam-

eraman whose face was round as a walnut.

"Let's look for them," Feri suggested.

They continued on, listening and peering into the darkness, but there was no sign of Tuuli and Mart, or Ivar, Marcsi and Pista. Finally they came to a street, but neither of them had any idea which way they were walking. The cobblestone street became narrower and narrower. Red brick buildings lined both sides. But they kept walking, the blue balloon fluttering above them like a flag.

Feri liked those narrow, gloomy streets. He began to talk about his work:

"I want to do a film about prejudices," he said. "In Hungary we have hundreds of ridiculous prejudices. Particularly in the villages. That's why it is so hard to live there. My sister is a doctor in a small village. She has terrible problems. It's especially hard for doctors, since prejudices interfere with their work. One of her patients is rhesus negative. Do you know what that is?"

"No," Nelle answered.

"It has to do with the blood, like a blood group or something. In most cases it is positive. The rhesus factor is important when a woman wants children. If the mother is Rh negative and the baby is Rh positive, the infant can die. He can only be saved with a complete blood transfusion. But you can't do that in the village. That patient of my sister had lost two children already. My sister did everything she could so the third baby would be born in a hospital, but they wouldn't hear of it! Just the slightest hint that someone else's blood will flow in the baby's veins and that's it. The entire family was against it, even though having a child was the most important thing in that woman's life. There are always problems with mothers-in-law and things like that."

"Well, what happened?"

"The baby died. Though he could have been saved."

"How horrible!"

They wandered through the maze of streets which all turned in one direction, for some reason. There were no streets headed the other way. It seemed they would never get out of there. The street lights burned dimly. Nelle had an uneasy feeling.

"And your film?" she asked.

"Yes, my film..."

"I bet it will be very gloomy," she said.

"That's right," Feri agreed. "But the beginning is funny. Do you know how it will begin?"

"No."

"With frogs."

"Frogs?"

"Yes, with hopping frogs. Hungary exports frogs to France and Switzerland."

"Why?" Nelle asked in surprise.

"The French consider frogs a delicacy."

"Yuck!" Nelle said in disgust.

"Hungarian girls react just like you," Feri said. "We don't eat frogs either, though they are not bad."

"You've tasted them?"

"Yes. I try to free myself of prejudices."

They both laughed.

"All the same, frogs are repulsive," Nelle said.

"The Moslems think pork is repulsive," Feri said. "Do you eat pork?"

"Of course," Nelle laughed. "But I'm not about to eat a frog."

"That's up to you," Feri said. "So, my film begins with frogs, or to be more precise, with their legs, since only the legs are eaten. They are served in the best Paris restaurants to the discriminating gourmet."

"And then that woman appears?"

"Next a young man and woman appear, because young people suffer due to prejudices more than anyone else. In short, the film shows different young men and women from different parts of the world. Wherever I am lucky enough to have been. I just got back from Japan."

"From Japan!" Nelle exclaimed.

"Yes. And that balloon is from Japan. I had forgotten it was in my pocket."

Nelle stroked the silky surface.

"What were you doing in Japan?"

"Making a technical film. Not very interesting. But I shot some footage for my own film, as well. I have some photographs with me. Most of my film the fellows took back to Budapest. We returned via Moscow. I detoured to Riga since Marcsi and Pista invited me. We are old friends."

"Good Lord, I would sure like to see those photos!" Nelle said.

"I'd be glad to show them to you, but they are at my hotel. I have tapes of Japanese music and books, too."

"Good Lord!"

A taxi slowly drove up and stopped in front of one of the houses. Someone got out.

"Taxi!" Feri shouted, and grabbed Nelle's hand. They ran.

"Where to?" Feri asked when they had gotten in. Nelle told him where they were staying. The taxi began to move.

When they had left the maze of narrow streets, Nelle spoke:

"It is probably terribly interesting in Japan."

"Of course, it's interesting," Feri answered. "Though, to tell the truth, I had very little free time. We were swamped with work." Feri thought for a

moment. "We could stop by the hotel, if you want to hear Japanese music and look at the photographs," he said. "It's only ten-thirty."

Nelle agreed happily.

Could it be them? No, someone else again.

Ivar sat on the porch of the school and waited. He had no desire to go inside, where his traveling companions were sleeping, and go to bed, though it was foolish to be sitting there. Who was he waiting for? Mart? Why would he do that? They weren't such close friends that they couldn't live without one another. They were just classmates. Maybe Tuuli? That scatterbrain. He certainly wasn't waiting for Nelle. They had absolutely nothing in common. And yesterday evening didn't mean anything. A summer night and a pretty girl. Of course, she wasn't about to run away from that Hungarian.

Ivar sighed. He decided to sit outside in the fresh air for a while longer and then go to bed. Tomorrow they'd be on their way again. With Nelle everything was over, before it even really got started. She'd add him to her collection, along with whoever else comes along.

It was completely dark. Wispy clouds covered the moon. Here, at the edge of town, most of the lights in the windows were out. Either people were sleeping or away on vacation.

This time someone was coming for sure.

Ivar stood up.

It was Tuuli and Mart. Just the two of them. And they were unusually quiet.

"Well, you finally made it home!" Ivar said, disappointment in his voice. The vague hope that Nelle was with Mart and Tuuli was shattered.

"That's right," Mart said. "Is Nelle asleep?"

"Nelle hasn't come home yet."

"Oh no," Mart said, suddenly worried. "Where is she?"

"How do I know?"

"Weren't you all together?"

"No."

Tuuli did not say a word. She felt sick.

"Where could Nelle be?" Mart asked.

Ivar shrugged his shoulders:

"How do I know! Marcsi and Pista walked me home. You guys ran off, who knows where. There's no sense in doing anything with people like you."

Tuuli was offended. It seemed to her Ivar was hinting that there was something between her and Mart.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she said.

"Oh, pardon me!" Ivar said angrily. "I'm rude and stupid and can't express myself well. It's much more fun to run after some foreigner."

"What are you jumping on Tuuli for!" Mart shouted, defending the girl. "She didn't go running after anyone. She simply got sick."

"Sure..." Ivar said, waving his hand in dismissal. He himself realized he had gone too far. "Let's go to bed!"

He headed for the door.

"But ... what should we do?" Mart said, upset.

"About what?" Ivar asked, stopping.

"About Nelle."

"That doesn't concern me."

"Nelle is lost!" Tuuli said, worried. "We have to find her."

"The cameraman will get her home," Ivar said.

Mart also felt they could not abandon Nelle in a strange town.

"Let's go to bed!" Ivar said determinedly, and went inside. Mart and Tuuli trudged along after him. Tuuli needed to be put to bed.

It was stuffy and hot in the classroom. In order not to wake the others, they did not turn on the light, though it was pitch black inside. They crept to their beds by feel, and had to move carefully since they did not want to stumble into the desks which had been pushed back against the wall.

"Ahh!" Tuuli screamed. She had bumped against someone's leg.

"Who is that?" Lea asked in a frightened, sleepy voice.

"It's us," Tuuli whispered, trying not to wake the others.

"Oh, it's you. You scared me to death," Lea said, reassured. "What time is it?"

"I don't know... It's not midnight yet."

"But it's so dark. Everybody home now?"

"Nelle isn't here yet," Tuuli answered in confusion.

"Where is she?"

Tuuli did not answer.

"She's disappeared," Mart's voice came from the corner.

"What do you mean, she's disappeared?" Lea asked in surprise.

"Don't shout. You'll wake up the others," Ivar muttered nervously though everyone around was sleeping peacefully, just like in their own beds at home.

Lea began to gather her clothes, feeling around in the dark.

"We've got to find her," she said.

"In the little town of Riga?" Ivar asked sarcastically.

"We'll walk down the road leading to the center of town."

"Don't get excited, you can stay but we're going," Mart said. "I'll just get a flashlight."

"You can count me out! I'm not about to go playing policeman," Ivar declared. He had already undressed, and gloomily slid under his blanket, angry with himself and the world.

Tuuli lay down too, but as soon as she closed her eyes, her head began to spin and she felt nauseous. She tried to lie with her eyes open. Her heart was aching—for herself and for the others. In general everything was terrible. She felt like crying.

Lea slipped out of the room after Mart. They walked over to the steps. After the stuffy classroom the air felt cool and fresh. Lea shivered.

"Where were you? Why did you get back so late?"

"We had dinner in a restaurant and met some Hungarians," Mart began to explain. "Well, you see, we had a little to drink. Then we all left together. Tuuli felt bad, so the two of us sat down on a bench for a while. Then we came home." Mart shrugged his shoulders. "Ivar was sitting here on the porch waiting for us. We thought Nelle was already inside asleep, but it turned out she hadn't come back yet."

Lea grew very serious.

"Who were those Hungarians?" she asked.

"Two graduate students from Moscow and a film cameraman."

"That's just great!" Lea said.

Mart felt guilty.

"If you want, we can call that cameraman," he said, embarrassed. "He gave me his phone number. But I don't think he'll be there."

Lea also felt certain he wouldn't be at his hotel, but they had nothing else to go on in their search for Nelle. They could not sleep peacefully knowing their friend was lost in a strange town.

They went to find a phone booth. The first telephone they came to was out of order. The second worked.

Lea held the flashlight, while Mart dialed. The number was busy. It took them a while before they reached the hotel switchboard. After that, someone immediately picked up the phone in Feri's room. Mart had not thought about what to say and was taken aback. In his embarrassment he did not beat around the bush, and immediately asked where Nelle was.

Feri's calm voice answered. He spoke so loudly that Lea could clearly hear every word.

"She's here," Feri said.

And then they heard Nelle's voice.

"Who is this?"

"Mart. And Lea."

"How did you come up with the great idea to call here?"

"Well, we were wondering where you could have vanished."

"What are you, my baby-sitter or something?" Nelle asked insolently. "Got any other prejudices?"

The receiver cracked, and they heard a dial tone.

They left the phone booth.

"I'm glad we found her," Lea said.

"Uh-huh."

"She was furious."

"Yes. She thought we were checking up on her."

Lea could not understand that.

"Why is she mad at us?" she asked. "It seems to me only natural that we should keep together in a strange town."

Mart smiled coldly. He felt hurt.

"Why in the world did you go to that restaurant?" Lea asked. "Drinking and the like. A refined evening, right? Is that why you rode your bikes to Riga, to get away from the watchful eyes of your parents? Real hotshots. And Komsomol members at that. And during a bike trip."

"Stop with the moralizing!" Mart said angrily. "There's no point."

He was miserable enough as it was.

Lea shrugged her shoulders and fell silent.

It was the most difficult day they had experienced on their whole trip. There were hills and a great deal of traffic. The sun beat down on them mercilessly, and there was no place to swim. And to make matters worse, they often had to ride over ten kilometers of road which was under repair. But the most unpleasant thing was everyone's mood. They all knew something had happened the night before, but it was not clear just what. No one said a word, and as a result, the event seemed mysterious and important. The others knew that Nelle, Tuuli, Mart and Ivar had come back late and had been drinking, but that was not all. Something else had happened. Katrin had half woken up and had heard voices.

The nocturnal incident worried Yuri most of all. He felt responsible for the group's moral purity. And somehow, something unpleasant had occurred while he slept calmly. Lea knew more about it, but she wasn't talking. And Yuri was very anxious and worried.

Tuuli kept falling back. Every four or five kilometers everyone had to stop and wait for her and Lea. Under the circumstances, those interruptions were not the usual pleasant rest stops. No one felt like joking. They just sat gloomily by the side of the road next to their knapsacks until Yuri gave the signal to move on.

It was hard for Nelle as well. Her heart pounded, and she was out of breath.

But she did not lag behind the others by a meter. Her pride prevented her. Perhaps she would have been unable to hold out on pride alone, but the frequent stops they made because of Tuuli helped.

Around noon Tuuli leaped from her bicycle, threw herself in the tall grass in the ditch, and burst out crying. Everyone felt uncomfortable, especially Mart.

"What should we do?" Katrin asked disconcertedly. Everyone gathered around the sobbing Tuuli.

"Ninety bottles of beer on the wall..." Mati sang quietly, through his teeth.

Nelle shrugged her shoulders scornfully. Lea gave him a withering look, laid her bicycle on the side of the road, and sat down next to Tuuli. And though she did not say anything to Tuuli, did not even touch her, Tuuli stopped crying.

"Maybe we should break for lunch?" Lea suggested, looking questioningly at Yuri.

He nodded gratefully, glad to find a way out of the awkward situation. True, there wasn't a place nearby where they could light a fire, and there was no brush-

wood or water, but they could eat sandwiches and buy something to drink later when they came to a store. It wasn't much further to Sigulda, where they were to spend several days. They could have supper there.

Toomas and Nelle were responsible for meals that day. Lea offered to help make sandwiches, but Nelle answered sharply:

"No thank you," and with a vengeance began to spread butter on the thick slices of bread that Toomas had cut.

Mart couldn't find a place to sit. He really wanted to join Tuuli, but the opportunity did not present itself. And it was awkward in front of the others. Besides, he was not sure Tuuli wanted to talk to him. Yuri was dying for an excuse to begin a conversation, but Mart had no desire to talk to him. Finally he sat down next to Ivar, who was lying on his back and looking sullenly at the sky. Katrin and Mati sat on the other side of him. Eda zealously was sewing a zipper on a pair of pants.

A tense silence reigned.

The outburst occurred that evening.

They had set up camp along the Gauja River, not far from the sandy bank. There were remnants of a previous campfire, tent stakes piled under a bush, and empty cans in a hole dug to one side. Obviously someone had camped on that spot not long before.

So, it happened that evening. Nelle was dishing out the soup. Katrin wanted to say something, but Mati stopped her with a loud "Shhhh!" Katrin blushed. That was enough.

"I have feelings too, you know!" Nelle stated, and threw the ladle in the pot.

It got absolutely quiet, as quiet as a grave.

"I don't understand why you are all picking at me?"

No one knew what to say.

"We are responsible for you," Yuri mumbled. All day he had been thinking about that, and had repeated those very words to himself.

"So that's it!" Nelle shouted, losing her temper completely. "Well then, be responsible! Yesterday I drank liqueur and struck up an acquaintance in a restaurant. And I intend to continue to do so in the future!"

Tuuli lowered her eyes. Mart and Ivar continued to chew sullenly. The others stopped eating and waited with interest to see what would happen next.

"Don't talk nonsense!" Lea said. "Pour me some soup!"

Nelle picked up the ladle and filled her mess-tin. Then she poured some for herself and began to eat.

But the storm that had been gathering all day did not abate with that outburst. Nothing had been cleared up.

Yuri rose.

"I think it's time to stop this game of silence," he said. "We all have the right to know what happened last night. Lea has the floor. Please tell us what you know about all this."

"Another meeting," Mati sighed, pretending to be indifferent, though he was all ears.

"Exactly!" Yuri said, annoyed. "It's time to hold a general meeting of our group. Lea has the floor."

"You know where you can go with your meeting!" Lea said. "We're always together anyway."

"Yuri has this thing about holding meetings," Toomas said.

"Stop interrupting and let Lea talk!"

In a calm voice, Lea briefly told them about the events of the night before.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Yuri asked, exasperated.

"You would have called a meeting right then and there!" Mati chuckled.

"There was no need to wake you up," Lea responded.

"What do you mean?" Yuri asked in surprise. "After all, I am the group leader. I should know what is going on in my group."

"Yuri is responsible for us," Mati added quietly.

"Shut up!" Katrin said.

Yuri bristled. They were attacking him. Why did no one ever take him seriously?

"Let's hear what Nelle has to say!" he said sharply.

Nelle was taken aback.

All day she had been sure they were all talking about her. From envy and nastiness, and of course, from a desire to gossip. She had imagined what they were saying, and had grown furious at the whole world.

And suddenly she had learned that until now, many of the others had not been aware of what happened.

"Lea already told you everything," she muttered.

But that was not good enough for Yuri.

"We want to hear what *you* have to say about it! After all, you're facing pretty serious charges," he said. "Where were you?"

"Now Nelle's moral character is blotched," Mati said, trying to provoke her.

Nelle grew furious.

"You are interested in knowing where I was?" she asked defiantly. "You've already heard that I was in a hotel, in a man's room. A man I had met an hour before at a restaurant. I'm not about to fill you in on the details."

"There, you see!" Yuri said. He had a difficult time hiding his joy over the fact that he had been able to raise the issue to one of principles.

Nelle looked at him with a strange expression on her face. That made Yuri

even angrier. They thought he was a little boy. They laughed at him behind his back. Yet, he was the one who was fighting for a just cause. Yuri swaggered like a young cock.

"I do not understand the attempt to hush up the facts!" he announced in a ringing voice. His face was red. "And you're a member of the school Komsomol committee," he said, directing that last statement to Lea.

"In my opinion, this is a disgrace to our whole class," Katrin said.

"Exactly!" Yuri said, encouraged by the support.

"You're a strange girl," Katrin said, turning to Nelle. "It's as if you enjoy upsetting everyone for no reason. You are not like everyone else. It's like you're from a different mold."

"And they broke the mold after they made her," Mati said.

"Aren't you so very clever," Nelle said, screwing up her eyes.

Tuuli saw everything around her as if through fog. Yesterday evening and today had worn her out completely. She was afraid she would have to answer before the others. Katrin and Yuri's attitude toward Nelle frightened her. She felt that she too had done something terrible, something irreparable. She did not have the courage to lift her eyes.

"You are not even ashamed!" Yuri said, again attacking Nelle. "At least Tuuli realizes what she did and is sorry."

"Leave Tuuli alone," Nelle said coldly. "She has nothing to do with this, do you understand?"

"Tuuli is a victim of alcohol," Mati said with feigned sympathy.

Tuuli blushed.

"Why are you picking on the girls?" Mart asked. "There are men involved too."

"Exactly," Yuri said. "And we want an explanation from you. What were your motives in going to that restaurant?"

"Motives!" Mart flew into a rage. "We simply went there to have dinner. As I understand it that is what public eating places are for."

"Seniors in high school do not go to restaurants."

"Are seniors in high school supposed to starve?"

"There are cafeterias."

"Why is a cafeteria any better? And anyway, in another year we won't be seniors in high school. We need to make the transition gradually, otherwise we might suffer nervous breakdowns."

"But you drank alcoholic beverages!" Yuri retorted indignantly.

"We have to gradually get used to them, too," Mati said.

"You keep your wise cracks to yourself!" Ivar jumped on him.

"Yes, and you Ivar!" Yuri exclaimed. "What will your coach say? You're a

disgrace to the whole basketball team!"

"That's my business," Ivar said.

"I don't understand why you're all making such a big deal of this," Toomas said. "So they went to a restaurant. Who cares? You're howling like a bunch of lunatics."

Yuri opened his eyes wide.

"Are you saying you approve of high school seniors who get drunk while on a bike trip and run around with foreigners to hotels?" he asked gloomily.

"Cut out the crap!"

"I'm only repeating what Nelle herself said."

"O. K. then, Nelle. Why don't you explain," Toomas said to her. "Tell us exactly what happened. Otherwise we might form a very bad opinion of you!" He shook his head in mock reproach.

But Nelle was enraged. A person could tell all kinds of things about himself, but when Yuri twisted her words like that... And then Katrin! She was not about to say anything to those kind of people.

"There's no sense in explaining things to a bunch of asses," she said sharply.

"So that's the way you're going to be!" Yuri sputtered angrily. "We'll continue this conversation in Tallinn!"

That last remark sounded like a threat, but it also marked the end of an unsuccessful conversation. Yuri, looking very self-righteous, began to eat his cold soup.

The meeting was over.

Evening fell. Grasshoppers sang in the grass. Lea, Katrin and Eda began to play ball by the light of the campfire. Mati smoked and fiddled with the radio dial out of boredom. Nelle gathered the empty mess-tins in a bucket in order to take them to the little stream to wash. Toomas took the handle.

"Listen, I'll go. You made supper."

Nelle pulled the bucket away sharply.

"I don't need anyone's help."

And she headed for the river.

The water was dark and the sky was full of stars. A ray of moonlight shone on the river. Nelle disturbed it with her hand, and began washing the dishes.

IMANTS ZIEDONIS

(b. 1933)

Soviet Latvian writer Imants Ziedonis was born into the family of a fisherman in Ragaciems, presently in Tukums Region of the Latvian SSR. After graduating from secondary school in Tukums, he worked as a recreation organizer at a sanatorium, as a teacher in Olaine and Kemeri, then did road repair work, and finally found a job in a library. He graduated from the correspondence department of the Latvian State University and took a post as a teacher in a school for young workers. Then Ziedonis completed the Advanced Writing Courses of the Soviet Writers' Union and became an editor at the Liesma Publishing House and a literary consultant for the magazine *Liesma.*

Imants Ziedonis first appeared in print in 1956, and his first collection of verse, *Sand of Earth and Dreams*, came out in 1961. Subsequently, the collection *Dynamite of the Heart* appeared in 1963, followed by *Motorcycle* (1965), *Looking into Myself* (1968), *How a Candle Burns* (1971), *Draught* (1975), and *My Stone Sleepeth Not* (1978). Ziedonis' poems are noted for their concern for public issues, dynamism, and emotionality. In addition to his poetry, Ziedonis has many prose works to his credit, such as *Poet's Diary* (1965), *The Foamy Path* (1967), and *Kurzemite* (1976). The poet's book *Particolored Tales* (1973) has evoked lively interest among young and old alike. These are not the simple, guileless tales traditional in Latvian children's literature, but a fascinating play of ideas, intellect, and perceptions. The writer teaches his readers to see, understand, and feel in new ways. His words ring out with a vividness that approaches the visual, catching up one and all in their play of light and color.

Ziedonis the artist has a distinctive, individual style which is quite unique among Latvian authors. For the reader who wishes to gain an insight into the esthetic views, reasoning and emotional tenor of the poet, the book *Epiphanies,* a remarkable collection of prose poetry, should prove helpful. In this dialogue with the reader, the author puts forth his philosophical convictions concerning the moral and esthetic norms for the individual in society and the duty of one human being before another. *Epiphanies* is a soul-searching work in which old Latvian songs and traditions, from town and

countryside, from the banks of the free-flowing rivers of his homeland are revived. Ziedonis also writes lyrics for songs and screen plays for documentary and feature films and devotes considerable time to translation. His work is known far beyond the borders of the Soviet Union.

Imants Ziedonis

Excerpts from *Epiphanies*

EXCERPTS FROM *EPIPHANIES**

Many joys have passed me by, as they have you, no doubt. Some of them were so close I had only to put out my hand to touch them.

Take the incomparable joy we experience when we have helped another human being. The joy of helping.

Once I set off along a gleaming road to stop somewhere and help someone along the way. I was on vacation and had plenty of money in my pocket and enough of everything I needed, but still I had a strange desire to experience something new.

So I set off from home along that gleaming road, determined to spare not time nor energy nor my aching feet. I was dying to help someone.

The first discovery I made was that people simply don't believe that for no reason at all, some total stranger who happens to be passing by would stop to help them without having any ulterior motive.

"Don't bother, we'll manage," they would hurry to say. "Don't trouble yourself. We can do it ourselves."

Others would say simple-heartedly:

"Look, we don't have any money. We can't afford to pay you."

Occasionally, someone would tell me:

"Get the hell out of here! We'll manage just fine without your help."

Of course, you can always stop at the edge of some meadow, pick up a rake, and say quietly: "I really want to help you." Then start working without waiting for an answer.

If the whole family is working, and there are one or two daughters of marriageable age, then the reason for the unexpected appearance of this young man seems entirely clear. But if there is no such temptation, no one will understand what's going on.

At first, no one will say a word to you. After all, there are lots of nuts and weirdos in this world, so they figure you'll get bored pretty soon and be on your way.

But when one stack has been finished and the next one started, people will start looking at you with overt curiosity wondering if you really will stay.

When you remain and carry one armful of hay after another, they will begin to wonder what kind of a strange character you are.

Soon you will notice that one of them—an old man or a youth—has dragged a can of fresh buttermilk with barley from under a bush and is having a long, refreshing drink.

*English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

Oh, how you would like a drink! Will no one offer you something to quench your thirst?

You can already feel that refreshing beverage cooling your parched tongue with its icy pearls of barley soothing your throat. And this sensation makes you thirstier than ever! You feel as if you're dying of thirst! And you begin to wonder what's in the can—cool fruit juice, perhaps, or cold well water mixed with gooseberry or raspberry jam.

The person who was drinking will put the milk can back under the bush. All the heat of the sweltering July sun will burn your throat, and your heart will race in expectation, as drops of sweat roll down your cheeks like tears. If only someone would take a look at you now and see how badly you wanted something to drink! Now the great moment of trial had arrived: human dignity and humanity itself was at stake here. Now you would see what you were worth in their eyes and whether you deserved a swig of their fruit juice or buttermilk—and whether they were worthy of your respect. Now your heart would be beating not so much from the heat as from the tension of wondering if you would be offered something to drink or not.

Finally, someone would say softly:

"Elvira, offer our helper something to drink."

So you would drink of that incomparable Kurzema buttermilk with barley whose pearls will settle somewhere near your heart and flutter like tiny white angels. Your heartbeat will become more even, and in your new-found calmness and self-assurance, you will laugh and wonder at your own excitement.

Now you have been accepted! Maybe they think you're crazy, but they understand what you're about in any case. They have accepted your offer of friendship and your help, and when the last stack is done, you will be invited home for the noon meal. If the dog barks at you, someone will quiet it down, and if you want, you can spend the night in the loft. They'll give you a place to sleep and not ask for any identification. At most, they'll request that you not smoke in the hayloft. The cows will be lowing somewhere below, and buttermilk lumps white as snow will haunt your dreams, fluttering and singing above your head. When you wake, it will already be morning, and you will realize it was the crowing of ordinary roosters that invaded your dreams.

But it can happen that no one in the meadow will offer you anything to drink: they just don't consider your help worthy of their buttermilk. Perhaps they simply lack the virtue of hospitality, or maybe they are just stingy. And for such people, you will remain merely a day laborer, a stranger: such folks don't entrust their precious milk can to just any passerby!

But in the end, you have to understand them, too, and that comprehension will be your reward. Continue on your way and help those who are in need of your assistance.

* * *

Nothing in this world comes without effort. It's a strange place to be sure. Wait a bit, you hear at every turn: wait, wait, wait!

So I find myself waiting constantly: until the trolley comes, until the potatoes are boiled, until I get to heaven. But still I hear: don't hurry, be patient; the next world can wait until you've finished this life.

The world is filled with expectations: an expectant mother, a young woman waiting for love, a hero awaiting a medal, some long-suffering soul awaiting relief. Be patient. Rome wasn't built in a day. And while you're waiting, time stands still: everything is transformed into expectation. Every moment pokes along, a feast for idlers, awaiting the next moment, turned inside out and pushing backwards instead of forward.

To get anywhere, you have to move forward, not just stand there waiting.

They say, wait a while. Take counsel with your pillow. But isn't that just laziness? Never do today what can be put off till tomorrow... And then put it off one more day if you can. But is the future really that enormous green crawfish crawling backwards to meet us?

Are we moving towards the future, or is the future coming to us?

Wait a little, and the future will be here before you know it. Wait until the goal posts run out to meet the ball or the target comes closer and begs to be shot at. Wait a while! Be patient! Don't try to accomplish anything! Wait patiently, and your time will come.

But the only thing that will come to you that way is your coffin. No mistaking it. And you'll be carried out feet first.

"All things come to those who wait," says the old proverb.

But no! To get anything done, you have to go after it, not stand around waiting!

* * *

Hi there, Birch Tree! Let's have a little chat about life.

Tell me, when you run along in spring, and you're tinged and fringed in golden green, and the birds keep staring at you but just can't look their fill, don't you look at all your girlfriends with disdain? What kind of connections do you have that you managed to find such a bright-green shade of tulle?

Hi there, Mister Monkey! How are you doing! Are you having a good time swinging back and forth up there? Do you enjoy mocking one and all? Have you learned any new tricks lately? No? Well then, we'll just have to spit at someone

with that fine, broad, fat lip of yours. You can spit a lot farther than I can with a lip like that!

Let's go sit on that branch and try to spit in the hippopotamus' ear. Pick yourself a big bunch of hair's-foot to get your saliva glands working. Chew as if your life depended on it: look how much spit you've got there. Now let's give it a try!

Hello, Crow! They say you're a fine artist, and your drawings are excellent, so make me a design for my bookplates!

You're a winter bird, Crow, and winter is a game of chess: there's the white bishop jumping. The rook is covered with snow, the pawn is delivering the mail on a bicycle. The queen is wearing a fake-fur coat, and the king has a bad back. There he is hobbling across the field, his only desire to get to the village doctor.

It's no good joking with crocodiles or ask butterflies to knead clay.

It wouldn't do to play a comb in the Dome Cathedral or put a pipe organ on a train.

The pig's bladder has been stuffed with peas, and it rattles and the cat's tail has been belled. The God of Thunder is rumbling on high and sending his lightning bolts to earth.

Oh, I say, oh how necessary it is to know other languages.

* * *

We have a fine tradition in Latvia which makes lots of people happy.

On New Year's Eve (or just before International Women's Day at the beginning of March) we hold a birthday lottery. Everyone who wants has the right to take a lottery ticket, and if it's a lucky one, the radio and newspapers announce that your birthday will be celebrated on such and such a day.

Everyone knows that this year, for example, there were three winners: engineer N. from a low-voltage equipment shop; C., a retired lady; and some girl or other from Vilyana. Or a different trio entirely. Their birthdays will be celebrated in Riga on an enormous stage.

Whole delegations and people in high positions will come to congratulate them for the mere reason that they exist. Because they're good workers and honest people. And if they're not such good workers or are a little on the shady side, the commission will examine the matter carefully and find something good and praiseworthy about them all the same. For there is no one on earth, even the most miserable of men, to whom we could not become comrade, brother, and friend, as François Villon once put it. Or was it somebody else?

So there is certainly something praiseworthy about you. For example, that you always leave your rake teeth-down in the field. One person has powerful muscles, and another, good taste. Some are so quick-witted that they begin to laugh long before the punch line. Others are so fast in their principles that they wouldn't step aside even for a mad dog.

If you win the birthday lottery, you will be praised and reminded of the good you've done. You'll be told you haven't lived in vain. And what more does anyone need than to be told he's worth something in the end!

And you really are worth something, you know! And if your friends and relatives don't tell you, then the commission will—after locating the necessary documentation, of course. It will bring this information to the attention of the public on that most joyful of all days—your birthday.

It goes without saying that if you have no desire to celebrate your birthday in such a fashion—as if you were some well-known writer or artist—then don't take a lottery ticket, and you can have a quiet little party at home with your mother-in law, wife, and children. Here I am speaking only for those who intend to participate in the lottery. After all, this tradition adds color and variety to all our birthday celebrations for it is not just the scholars, artists, and other great men of our times who are worthy of admiring glances at their venerable old age.

That's why we have such a tradition, this clever lottery: let chance put you up there on the stage and say:

"Here he is! Just look at him! He's still young and hasn't yet accomplished anything in life. Or: he's old as the hills and everybody's already forgotten him. Or: he's ordinary in every way, just like all the other people in our village. Come and congratulate him. After all he's a human being just like the rest of us and is worth something, too.

* * *

Sing, I say to you, sing! Sing when you're feeling good. Sing in the face of rudeness or meanness. Sing in the face of him who reviles you. Sing in exultation of your superiority when you are being beaten.

I remember it well. I was a little boy then, and when I looked out of the window, I saw a neighbor woman beating her son.

He stood by the shed and sang. His mother beat him with all her might, but he stood there laughing and singing. Finally, she got tired and dropped her hands, and he walked away, rubbing his sore shoulders and back. But he walked away singing.

Sing on crowded trolleys, and if you must pay for it, then pay gladly!

Sing when you're drinking wine. Sing by gravesides. Don't stand there in silence! Sing! The dead won't hear you: it's not them you're singing for! Sing not their deaths, but your life. Sing not the branches of evergreen atop the fresh mound of earth but the leaf at the top of that tree. Sing for the living, for it's you who need the song—not the dead and departed.

...You awake at night to the warbling of nightingales—you see, the song lives on through the darkness.

Do you sing only on sunny mornings? What about songs of despair and anger and attack?

Where is it, your song of attack? Have you already won the victory and therefore sing only in the morning? Or have you been defeated and never sing at all?

* * *

I was suddenly overcome by the fear that I might forget my sister entirely. As if we were total strangers.

I've talked with so many strangers in my life, but have I ever taken time to really sit down and talk with my sister? We meet and say hello. Say hello, then good-bye.

For some reason, today I noticed the tiny crow's-feet about her eyes for the first time, and her hands, calloused from hard work, and her eyes, so like mine.

To tell the truth, I probably haven't ever stroked her head, except when she was a child. I beat on her more often than not. She wanted to go everywhere with me, but I didn't want to take her. It never occurred to me then that she tagged around behind me only because I was closer to her than anyone else and she was too little to have any friends of her own yet.

That happened later.

I remember her on those rare days when we celebrated some event or other in her life. The relatives would sit around the table, eating and drinking, and chatting about money or work. And no one noticed what weary, careworn hands she had: the hands of a toiler. They never noticed her beautiful hair, her clear, dark-blue eyes—eyes that needed love. No one ever asked: what do you need, how can we help you? Instead, they all said: oh, what a fine girl! A little angel!

I didn't go up to her then and hug her. I had not a kind word for her, but some standard, ordinary congratulations—the type one stranger might mumble to another. I was the youngest of those who were older than her, and I should have understood—after all, I was her brother.

Then there was the wedding. My sister's wedding. And she had no time for her relations: He had appeared on the scene.

Then there were her children and mine. She had her work, and I mine. Our cares were quite different, and we were both too busy to take time out for each other.

But today, I was seized with an inexplicable fear: it was as if I had dreamed about her and she was a little girl again. It was as if the voice of our blood ties had called out to me. How many strangers have I befriended over the years, but never once have I stroked my own sister's head although once, I was closer to her than anyone else, and her eyes are very much like mine.

That fear came upon me suddenly as if I had heard the voice of the common blood that courses through our veins. A voice coming from the darkness deep within us.

* * *

My mother said:

"When I was young, I could dance on a china plate."

Even though I'm not so very old, I can't dance at all, and I never could. But my sister is the spitting image of our mother in that respect.

She's as nimble-footed as a fairy. When she was little, she could dance in a mug. She'd gulp down a mug of milk, then dance inside it.

She would blaze inside the mug like a tiny flame, and only her hands would flutter on the outside. She would get turned over along with the mug, but she wouldn't get offended in the least: she'd just hop onto the saucer and dance there as if it were as big as a crater, raising sparks and dust all the while.

I could wade through mud or deep snow with my feet, but they wanted to dance so badly they jerked like a dog on a chain, but to no avail.

But my sister danced anywhere and everywhere.

She danced out all the A's she made in school, and not just in gym.

She could dance anything with her nimble feet.

She danced through the periodic table as lightly as the other kids played hopscotch.

Geometry was like one big dance hall for her. She said I need to rhombus-rumba through geometry.

So she waltzed through squares and cylinders and minuetted herself an A in geometry.

I have lead feet so heavy they sometimes weep at night.

But my sister dances always and everywhere. She can drink a goblet of wine and dance inside the goblet, and sometimes a fellow would drain a snifter of cognac and ask her to dance inside the snifter.

I love my sister a lot and don't want to envy her, but I'm clumsy as a bull in a china shop. I'm so clumsy, my feet ache in frustration.

I want to have children who can dance like my sister. They are already dancing within me like electrons in a molecule. When they're tiny newborns, they'll dance in thimbles. I'll teach them to dance the multiplication table just like my sister does.

Whenever I wash a plate, I can see the traces of their feet on it. The wind rustles the flowers on the plate, and my own feet feel light. I can sense these other light feet within my heavy ones.

How did I come out so lead-footed with such a nimble-footed mother and such agile children: I'm like a log in a stream, I guess. Like a snag in a river!

My children are light and fluffy as clouds, while I plummet from the sky like a stone. Everyone around me is dancing, and I can't get the lead out of my feet for anything!

* * *

Every day has its bright spots, its revelations.

You have gone through the day without noticing anything in particular, but keep going—and don't blink or you might miss it: it could vanish in the twinkling of an eye.

This morning, there was dew on the grass, but the sun wasn't shining, so the dewdrops were a grayish red, and the roses were silent.

The next morning, there was sunshine and dewdrops aplenty, but there were no roses: they had already finished blooming.

Trinity, three in one, three-way harmony: that is probably the heart of the matter.

The flower and I are not enough. We need the sunshine, too.

Neither are the birch tree and I sufficient: we must have a breeze as well. Or perhaps a starling or some hoarfrost on the branches.

The gillyflowers smelled gorgeous last night, but I had a stuffy nose.

I had a fireplace and plenty of wood, but I didn't have any matches.

I had a watch and it was running, but it didn't have any hands.

The day is darkness which must be lit by the glow of those hands.

The stones we skip on the pond must bounce at least once. But this evening, my stone sank. It didn't skip at all.

It was as if someone had already stripped the orchard clean.

If the day doesn't have even a single flash, I can't fall asleep at night.

At the end of one such flashless day, I watched television in desperation.

Somewhere in another country, in a small city in Czechoslovakia, youthful minstrels—a bunch of fellows with guitars—were singing in the twilight under the bare trees in the autumn haze.

They were fine boys who strolled down the fall roads singing by cattle-sheds and flower-beds.

They were merry and melancholy like all the Czech people and like everyone on earth should be.

Water gushed from the watch and time ceased to exist.

The Earth revolved slowly on its axis along with Prague and my own Bauska and Valdemarpils.

I tossed a stone onto the surface of the pond, and it skipped and skipped, not wanting to sink at all.

That day had its flash after all.

Raduga Publishers
Moscow

The book illustrator Galina Makaveyeva.

Galina Makaveyeva was born in the Urals in 1936. As a child she dreamed of becoming a ballerina, then an architect, but in 1959 she graduated from the Moscow Polygraphical Institute and became a graphic artist.

In 1964 Galina began working for leading Moscow publishers as an illustrator of children's books. She travelled a great deal, and the new impressions produced interesting new works, drawings, lithographs, engravings and etchings. In 1969 she was appointed head designer of *Murzilka*, the popular children's magazine.

Galina has taken part in many exhibitions in the Soviet Union and abroad, in Finland, West Berlin, Austria, Japan, and Italy.

Her illustrations for Yuri Koval's *A Purple Bird* (1983) and Novella Matveyeva's *Rabbit Village* (1984) were awarded first prize at All-Russia and All-Union competitions.